

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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## Editorial

### Visit to Pune 11-13 November 2000

Pune, nestling in the shadow of the Western Ghats, with its hills and lakes, is well known for its bird life and I was delighted

to be invited by Prakash and Swathi Gole to spend a week-end there. Even though I was expecting a great deal, the wealth of Pashan Lake amazed me. Here, as in many areas of our country, the Defence Services have played their part in protecting considerable sections of our natural environment, by keeping them out of bounds for men and cattle. Though the new highway to Mumbai borders one side of this wetland, it is a large enough area to withstand the pressure and the noise of traffic at one end. The other sides are wooded and quiet.

I am not a good note-taker (a deplorable weakness), but the picture of Pashan in my mind is yet undimmed. Bronze-winged and pheasant-tailed jacanas, large whistling teals, coots, cormorants, purple herons, nuktas, spot-billed ducks, shovellers, cotton teals, a very large flock of whiskered terns and many other species delighted us. Noteworthy was the presence of a few brahminy ducks, presumably fresh from their breeding grounds in Ladakh.

Later, driving past the NDA establishment and the Khadakvasla Dam, in the surrounding scrubland we saw minivets, a cuckoo shrike, a tree-pie, many drongos, and a solitary Indian roller. At the edge of the water there was a pair of that most interesting great reed warbler (which descends from Kashmir in winter), and blackwinged stilts (the plover with the longest legs, hence able to feed in areas where others cannot, and also one of the most widely spread birds worldwide). Surprisingly, here as in Goa and Kihim, at about the same time, I saw hardly any mynas. But I was glad to see house sparrows in Pune (the birds which have almost vanished from Bangalore) as also its rarer cousin the yellow-throated sparrow.

On the 12th evening we drove to Andavan, a 1000 feet high hill where the Gole's cottage overlooks the Khadakvasla and the Panshet Dam. Surrounded by a range of hills in the far distance (one of which is Mahabaleshwar) the landscape with its elevations and depressions, and its tree cover, acquires a magical aspect at sunset, and I was anxious to see and hear the birds at sunrise the next morning. At 5 in the morning I thought I heard the repeated triple-notes of the scops-owl (*Otus scops*) renamed by the authors of B.I.S. as the oriental scops owl (*Otus sunia*). But the description of the voice in Grimmett *et. al.* makes me doubt whether it was not a different bird which I heard.

When the sun rose there was a feast. A blackwinged kite hurtled down in uncharacteristic fashion and sat on an electric wire above us, inviting us to have a good look. We found it lacked the bright red eye and the yellow legs shown in the paintings of this bird and decided it could be a female, though the books do not mention a different colour scheme for the sexes. A family of pea-fowl walked away leisurely into a garden. Large grey babblers assembled on the road; red-vented bulbuls, loras, white-eyes, white-spotted fantail flycatchers, red-breasted flycatchers, rose finches, spotted munias, a pair of grey quails (picking seeds with amazing rapidity from the grass on the edge of the road), a lone black redstart, tailor birds, jungle wren warblers, and some others which escape my mind.

Birds are a pleasure, but discussing them with knowledgeable friends is equally enjoyable. In the evening the Goles had



invited a few naturalists whose enthusiasm and knowledge was beyond the ordinary. Their intensive observations have led to the discovery of several species in areas outside the range indicated in the Bible, the B.O.I.B. by SA. One such is the striated bunting. But the highlight of the evening was the near perfect rendering of the calls of several birds by Kiran Purandare and some of the others. If they were to record their calls, even the birds would accept them as their own.

#### Birdlife International

In the July/August 2000 issue I had referred to the Project of B.I. regarding the publication of Threatened Birds of the World, and the possibility of our raising £ 250/- (Rs. 16,500) which would enable us to sponsor one page of the text. Apparently the book has been published and was released by Queen Noor of Jordan in Amman during the IUCN Congress held there in October. Asad Rahmani has sent me a copy of the Press Release to which I refer here.

My suggestion now is that we offer the money we have collected (approximately Rs. 8000/- to date, the latest being an M.O. of Rs. 500/- from Mrs. Pragati Nayak) to the BNHS for their Important Bird Area (IBA) programme. BNHS as you know is the Indian partner of B.I. I trust this is agreeable to all donors, and a line in reply from the donors would be appreciated.

Reverting to the Press Release referred to the above, here are a few extracts :

"..... the bad news is that the same forces which caused many of the extinctions of the past 200 years - such as deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and introduced predators - are still virulent today

The new assessment shows the number of bird species threatened with global extinction rose dramatically by 75, from 1111 in 1994 to 1186 in 2000 - a shocking 12% of all bird species.

A total of 182 species are now classed as critical .....

The country with the highest number of recorded bird extinctions from 1800 is the USA, with the majority of these from the Hawaiian Islands. The white-rumped vulture and long-billed vulture have .... suffered extremely rapid decline in India as a result of disease, compounded by poisoning, pesticide use and changes in meat processing practices resulting in a revised critical listing for both, having been Least Concern and Near Threatened in 1994.

.... the ethos behind Birdlife's Important Bird Area (IBA) programme ... is identifying a network of some 20,000 sites worldwide."

Let us play our part in the IBA programme.



Dr. Vibhu Prakash and Dr. Asad Rahmani have brought to the notice of ornithologists all over India the alarming situation concerning our vulture population. In many parts of our country, the decline of vultures is being reported, as is evident from the notes appearing in the recent issues of the Newsletter. But, for us in Kerala, there is no doubt left — the vulture has become virtually extinct here for more than two decades. We Keralites, can be 'proud' that as in the case of literacy, public health etc., we have set a 'Kerala Model' in bird extinction also!

Four species of vultures are known to occur in Kerala (Ali, 1969).

1. Red-headed vulture *Trogon calvus*
2. Long-billed vulture *Gyps indicus*
3. White-rumped vulture *Gyps bengalensis*
4. Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

Apart from these, there is a single record of the Cinereous vulture *Aegypius monachus*, probably a straggler. (Sreekumar, 1991). The status of the four species as we can find from published literature is summarised in Table 1. This covers a period of about 9 decades, from 1906 to 1992. It is worth mentioning that the status according to Ali (1969) and

## Vultures in Kerala

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Neelakantan (1959) refers to the same period - the 1930's and 1940's; the period during which the field work for the respective work was done. It is evident from the table that the vultures have become increasingly rare during the century. The revised edition of Neelakantan (1969) was published in 1986 and in this work he has mentioned that all the species of vultures have become extremely rare. Robertson and Jackson (1992) was mainly based upon the field work of Michael Jackson during the period of 1935-72 in and around the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary (777 sq.km.), supplemented and up-dated by the field observations of Andrew Robertson between 1988 and 1992. They say that, the occasional sightings of vultures that they report of, could be individuals wandering into the sanctuary from the adjoining Tamilnadu plains. This work mentions of an instance in February 1991 when 'even a dead elephant failed to attract any' (vultures). Jafer Palot, who had worked at the Periyar WLS for 4 years from 1990-1994 is also of this opinion. During his study at Periyar, Jafer had seen more than 10 elephant carcasses, an average of 4 Dhole or Tiger kills per month; none had any vultures feeding on them. All his sightings of the white-rumped vulture were on the eastern side of the Western Ghats, belonging to Tamilnadu. Within the sanctuary, he had observed an occasional red-headed vulture. (Pres. Comm.)



Table 1

Species	Ferguson 1903-04	Baker & Inglis 1930	Neelakantan 1959	All 1909	Neelakantan 1966	Robertson or Jackson 1969 (Ponyar WLS)
<i>T. calvus</i>	Single specimen from south Travancore.	As in Ferguson 1903-04.	Common in low numbers.	? Resident, seen most commonly, not abundant.	Rare	Occasional individuals.
<i>G. indicus</i>	Rare	Rare (Ferguson 1903-04).	Not mentioned.	? Resident, not common or abundant.	Rare	Seen regularly upto 1954, not seen since.
<i>G. bengalensis</i>	Common, breeding.	Common	Common, breeding.	Resident, common but not abundant.	Rare	Increasingly rare since the 1960's.
<i>N. perspicillatus</i>	Common in drier parts.	Common in drier parts.	Rare	Resident, not uncommon.	Rare	Single record in 1954.

In the 1990's, checklists of the birds of most of the Wildlife Sanctuaries of Kerala were compiled either by individuals or groups of birdwatchers; the sighting of 4 white-rumped vultures at Wynad WLS is the only record worth mentioning. (Wynad Bird Survey Report, 1996). Jafer Palot observed a Gaur carcass being eaten by 20 white-rumped and 7 long-billed vultures at Begur in the Wynad WLS. Incidentally, this sanctuary is contiguous with the Mudumalai and Bandipur WLSs of Tamilnadu and Karnataka respectively. The Parassinikadavu Snake Park near Kannur, had a captive, immature white-rumped which was collected in a neighbouring place. In June 1999, the Park got an electrocuted white-rumped from Azikode, 10 km north of Kannur. Recently, there was a report of the white-rumped vulture nesting at Tholpetty, Wynad Dt.

During my childhood days (1960's) in my village Pattanur, Kannur (Cannanore) Dt. North Kerala, I remember seeing vultures till the late 60's. Leopards were still around, though there was no forest left in the village, and they used to lift domestic cattle and dogs. The missing cattle were usually 'found' by the villagers as half-eaten carcasses, after watching the soaring vultures swoop down. Along with the leopards, vultures also disappeared. Recently, I met an elderly gentleman there, who told me about a large roost of vultures that he saw several years back on a tall *Alstonia scholaris* tree of a nearby village. During birdwatching in 1979, the only sighting of a vulture I had in my village was that of an Egyptian vulture in overhead flight on 20th October 1998.

Though hard data such as roost count, nest count etc. are lacking, the disappearance of vultures from the skies of Kerala is a foregone conclusion. What could have happened to the vultures of Kerala? Probably a combination of several factors rather than a single one must have caused their population decline and local extinction. I feel that the following factors must have contributed greatly towards this:

### 1. Habitat changes

The landscape of Kerala has undergone radical changes during the last five decades since India's independence. Forest cover from 44.07% of the total geographical area in 1905 was reduced to 17.06% in 1973. During 8 to 10 years from 1965 to 1973, the annual rate of depletion was 248.32 sq.km/year, i.e., about one percent of the total geographical area. A study

conducted by the National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA) showed that 1235 sq.km. of forest in Kerala has been deforested within a period of less than 10 years from 1972-75 to 1980-82. (Nair 1991). Land-use pattern also changed — paddy fields and other wetlands were converted to plantation of cash crops, homesteads etc., mono-cultural plantations like rubber covered more area and hundreds of buildings — both commercial and domestic, came up. The extent of land holdings also decreased and got fragmented as agricultural land ceiling was imposed after the enactment of the Kerala Land Reforms Act 1971.

### 2. Pesticides

With the 'green revolution' of the 1960's organo-chlorine and other chemical pesticides came into regular use, and indiscriminate use of pesticides continues in greater quantity till this day. The effect of these chemicals on raptors has been well documented all over the world. (Newton 1979).

### 3. Changes in Livestock Management and Socio-cultural Attitudes

In Kerala, as elsewhere in rural India, dead cattle must have provided the single largest food source for the vultures. Historians have commented with surprise on the low number of livestock in Kerala in the 19th century. Topography of the area with dense forest cover full of predators like Tiger and Panther and absence of suitable pasture might have been the reason for this. Another was the social taboo, which forbid the lower castes from raising cows and consuming milk products (Buchanan 1807, Ward and Connor 1820, Logan 1887). The number of cattle recorded by the historians is given in Table II. It is evident that the number of livestock has increased almost sevenfold since the first quarter of the 19th century. Does it mean that there is proportional increase in the food availability for vultures? This is where two other factors concerning the changes in the Kerala society come to the fore.

Table II

Year	Source	Total Number of Cattle (cows, buffaloes)	Total Number of goats	Area covered
1807	Buchanan	149,899*	negligible	Malabar Dt.
1820	Ward & Connor	382,782*	27,360	Travancore and Cochin
1911	Menon	175,366	38,236	Cochin
1982	Census Report	35,053,359	2,003,795	Kerala

\*Combined figures will roughly give the total number for Kerala in the first quarter of 19th Century.

### i) Increase in the Population Density and Awareness of Social Hygiene:

The population density of Kerala has increased from 134.77/sq.mile (Travancore) and 163.8/sq.mile (Cochin) in 1820 (Ward & Connor) to 272/sq.mile in 1881 (Logan 1887) and now to 749/sq.km in 1991 (Population Statistics, 1991 Census). A population density of this dimension and the peculiar layout of Kerala villages, where the houses are well distributed and



not in clusters do not allow open disposal of carcasses in the first place. The awareness of social hygiene after independence made people do away with this practice altogether. This definitely affected the food availability of the vultures.

## ii) Change in Food Habits and Social Taboos:

A combination of several socio-cultural upheavals since the late 1950's and 60's changed the complete outlook of the average Keralite in the latter half of the 20th century. Cow slaughter was legalised by the state government and a considerable number of people belonging to certain communities, for whom beef eating is taboo, started consuming this as a cheap source of protein. The situation now in Kerala is that the cattle here never have a natural death. Though the crossbred cattle of today are prone to various diseases unlike the country cattle (another endangered species!), once diagnosed incurable, they end up at the butcher's. The cattle of the border districts of Karnataka and Tamilnadu where cow slaughter is banned, are also brought to Kerala for meat. In other words, we Keralites are consuming all the food that the vultures should have.

Interestingly, decline in the population of scavengers like the black kite has not yet been observed in most part of the state. But there is cause for alarm - Dr. B. Sreekumar reports that the black kite has vanished from the Kottayam town since the 1960's (Pers. Comm.)

The factors I have listed above are just assumptions based on reasoning. A thorough investigation on this classic case of local extinction is necessary before the same fate happens to yet another bird species.

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# Occurrence of Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*) in the Gangetic Flood Plains of West Bengal



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N.S. Road, In front of T.O.P., Malda 732 101, West Bengal

On 1st January 2000 A.D., I went to Sagardighi (25° 04' N & 88° 06' E) for "Millennium Birdwatching". While watching birds there at around 0845 hrs. I saw a sparrow-sized brownish bird very much restlessly foraging for insects, often shivering its tail. Its plumage colour was recorded as over-all upper parts brownish, upper tail also brown. Under parts from throat to vent whitish brown; throat & undertail coverts more whitish; a distinct white ring around its eyes. Its vocalization was something like "titi-titi", very sharp. After observing the bird for more than 20 minutes through 10 x 50 binocular at a distance of c.15 m. I identified the species as an adult Asian brown flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*) in the field (Grimmett *et. al.* 1998).

After consulting the references I found that the known breeding ranges of Asian brown flycatcher in India consists of three distinct areas : The Eastern himalayas, the Vindhya ranges

and the southern parts of the Western ghats (Ali & Ripley 1972) extending upto the Gir forest in Gujarat (Mundkur 1990).

In winter it spreads through most of the Peninsula but mainly in the Ghats of the Southern Peninsula and recorded from 1500 m below in the Western ghats (Ali & Ripley 1972, Ripley 1982, Grimmett *et. al.* 1998). In the Eastern parts of India it is recorded as apparently very scarce in Manipur by Hume, in the Cachar Hills by Baker and in the Garo hills by Godwin-Austen; also recorded from all parts of the Bangladesh by Rashid (Ali & Ripley 1972) and estimated as scarce passage migrant in Bangladesh (Grimmett *et. al.* 1998).

The 'Sagardighi' is a man made Fish cultivation centre of West Bengal Fishery Department, situated in the Malda district of West Bengal. It is in rectangular shape having an area of c. 1.50 sq.km. surrounded by agricultural lands & Mango (*Mangifera indica*) orchards and c.7 km. from Malda Town



(English Bazar). The Malda district is situated in the Indo-Gangetic flood plains, altitude varies from (38-40)m A.S.L. The neighbouring country, the Bangladesh is also situated in the same flood plains. (Ganges - Brahmaputra). The Malda district is a border district of India in the Indo-Bangladesh border.

The Asian brown flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*) is said to be common in the Bangladesh. Sighting of this species at this low altitude level as well as in the Gangetic flood plains is noteworthy. Or it could be that its wintering ranges extended upto the Gangetic flood plains of West Bengal.

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## A Summer Survey of Wetlands and Waterbirds near Madras

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While all of us are eager to go out counting birds in the wetlands in winter, very few of us are inclined to leave the shade of our roofs in the summer months to see how well our waterbirds thrive in the pinch period when water is scarce and the sun is hot and blazing. Like many others I too was complacent and rather reluctant to move out of my house until I received an assignment from the ENVIS Centre, BNHS to undertake a survey of the freshwater wetlands of the erstwhile Chingleput district (now Kanchipuram and Tiruvallur districts) in the summer of 1997. The fieldwork was spread over the months June to August.

Needless to say it was hot but not as bad as I imagined it would be. The availability of a car added to the mobility and I was able to cover a total of 110 wetlands spread over the 13 taluks. This survey enabled me to visit various parts of the district I had never been to before and gain a first-hand idea of the waterbodies of critical importance to our native waterbirds. I was able to work out a detailed itinerary using the Taluka maps obtained from the State Government Office. I covered the medium-sized and larger tanks usually but some of the smaller ones also were looked at whenever possible. [Details of the survey is given in Buceros (ENVIS Newsletter) Vol. 4 No. 3 (1999)].

Table 1  
Waterbodies hosting 500 or more individuals of water-birds

Name	Taluka	Date of visit	No. of birds	No. of species	Remarks
Kallipattu	Kanchipuram	5th June	500	13	Grey pelican - 8; Grey heron - 160; Spot-bill duck - 100; Openbill stork - 50; Blacktailed godwit - 1
Vadamadurai	Uthukottai	10th June	500	9	Dabchick - 100+; Purple heron; Grey heron; Openbill Stork - 3-4
Siruhavoor	Chinglepet	15th June	750	14	Dabchick - 200; Grey pelican - 5; Painted stork - 100+; White ibis; Whiskered tern - 25; Pheasant-tailed jacana - 2; Grey heron - 50
Madurantakam	Madurantakam	21st August	1000	22	Greater flamingo - 34; Spoonbill - 40+; Painted stork - 10-15; Openbill stork - 10; Cormorant - 200+; Dabchick - 50+; Garganey - 150+; Grey heron - 210+; Coot - 100+; Little egret - 50; Lesser whistling teal - 10
Pandaravedu	Pallipattu	31st August	1200	9	Dabchick - 500; Pond heron - 350; Indian shag - 300; Little egret, Whiskered tern, Coot.
Koovam	Tiruvallur	5th June	1500	11	Dabchick - 3-400; Little cormorant - 500; Lesser whistling teal - 25; Cotton teal - 100; Indian moorhen; Purple heron; Large egret
Thanneri	Sriperumbudur	5th June	5000	7	Little cormorant - 2000+; Coot - 500+; Cotton teal - 500+; Dabchick - 2-300; Purple moorhen
Poondi Reservoir	Tiruvallur	31st August	10000+	18	Coot - 4-5000; Cormorant spp. 1000+; Purple heron - 10-12; Pheasant-tailed jacana - 10-15; Grey pelican - 4; Glossy ibis - 2; Purple moorhen - 3-4; Dabchick



Of the 110 waterbodies surveyed, only 18 had some amount of water. Others were dry or drying up. Of these, only eight tanks had waterbird populations in excess of 500 individuals (See Table 1) ranging from 7-22 species. The maximum number of birds were seen at the Poondi Reservoir (10000+) whereas the maximum species diversity was noticed at Madurantakam (22 species).

The survey yielded a total of 39 species of waterbirds (Table 2) and an additional 69 species of land birds (See Appendix). Little egret and pond heron were the most frequently encountered species, seen in 34 and 30 wetlands respectively whereas coots (5000+) and cormorants (ca. 4000) were numerically the most abundant species. At least 11 species of long-distance migrants were noticed during the survey. These could either be birds staying through the summer or birds that have arrived earlier (common sandpiper and some other waders are known to arrive by July/August in Madras). The presence of 34 greater flamingo at Madurantakam tank on 21st August was a big surprise.

Table 2

## List of waterbirds seen and frequency of sighting

Little egret	34	Pond heron	30
Little grebe or dabchick	21	Redwattled lapwing	18
Little cormorant	14	Grey heron	14
Openbill stork	10	U.I. cormorants	10
Blackwinged stilt	8 *	Coot	7
Purple heron	5	Whiskered tern	5
Large egret	4	Whitebreasted waterhen	4
Spottedbilled pelican	4	Spotbill duck	4
Indian shag	4	Median egret	4
Cattle egret	3	Little ringed plover	3 *
Painted stork	3	White ibis	3
Lesser whistling teal	2	Cotton teal	2
Indian moorhen	2	Darter	2
Garganey	2 *	Blacktailed godwit	2
Purple moorhen	2	Pheasant-tailed jacana	2
Spoonbill	2	Gullbilled tern	2
Common sandpiper	2 *	Spotted sandpiper	2 *
Greenishank	2 *	Green sandpiper	1 *
Night heron	1	Greater flamingo	1 *
Marsh sandpiper (?)	1 *	Glossy ibis	1 *
U.I. tern	1	Egret sp.	1

(\*Winter visitor)

Dabchicks which are seldom seen in large concentrations were noticed in large numbers of upto 500 birds in several waterbodies. Similarly coots were seen in atleast three tanks in numbers exceeding 100; cormorants in four tanks (200 and above); cotton teal - 500+ at Thenneri; spotbill duck in three tanks (100-120 birds) and grey heron (150 & 210) at two tanks. The spottedbilled or grey pelican was encountered at four tanks - Kallipattu (6); Madurantakam (1); Poondi (4) and Siruthavoor (5) and the darter was seen at Govindavadi (4-5) and Vedanthangal (5).

Based on the numbers and species they support, all eight tanks listed in table 1 are of importance for sustaining waterbird populations in the harsh summer months, in the study area. The other waterbodies could also support better waterbird

populations in summer if only they are better maintained. It was found that several of the waterbodies were greatly neglected and had silted up heavily. The bunds were not maintained properly in others and many faced multiple threats in the form of encroachment, weed infestation, pollution, brick kilns etc. The free availability of electricity and subsidies/loan facilities offered by government schemes have led to proliferation of the bore-well system of irrigation and agencies responsible for the maintenance of these ancient waterbodies have neglected them as they are no longer used by the farmers. This is a very dangerous trend. The over-exploitation of ground water without any regard for its recharge could make this unsustainable for a long period.

I am grateful to the ENVIS Centre, BNHS and to Mr. J.C. Daniel, Honorary Secretary, BNHS for giving me the opportunity to conduct this survey and for his encouragement.

## Appendix

A complete list of birds seen during the survey (June-August 1997)

1) Little grebe or dabchick; 2) Grey or spottedbilled pelican; 3) Little cormorant; 4) Indian shag; 5) Indian darter or snakebird; 6) Grey heron; 7) Purple heron; 8) Pond heron or paddy bird; 9) Cattle egret; 10) Large egret; 11) Median egret; 12) Little egret; 13) Night heron; 14) Openbill stork; 15) Painted stork; 16) White ibis; 17) Glossy ibis; 18) Spoonbill; 19) Greater flamingo; 20) Lesser whistling teal; 21) Garganey; 22) Spotbill duck; 23) Cotton teal; 24) Blackwinged kite; 25) Periah kite; 26) Brahminy kite; 27) Shikra; 28) White-eyed buzzard; 29) Crested hawk eagle (?); 30) Short-toed eagle; 31) Grey partridge; 32) Bustard quail sp.; 33) Whitebreasted waterhen; 34) Indian moorhen; 35) Purple moorhen; 36) Common coot; 37) Pheasant-tailed jacana; 38) Red-wattled lapwing; 39) Yellow-wattled lapwing; 40) Littleringed plover; 41) Blacktailed godwit; 42) Marsh sandpiper (?); 43) Greenshank; 44) Green sandpiper; 45) Wood or spotted sandpiper; 46) Common sandpiper; 47) Blackwinged stilt; 48) Whiskered tern; 49) Gullbilled tern; 50) Ring dove; 51) Spotted dove; 52) Little brown dove; 53) Rose-ringed parakeet; 54) Pied crested cuckoo; 55) Common hawk-cuckoo; 56) Indian koel; 57) Small greenbilled Malkona; 58) Crowpheasant; 59) Collared scops owl; 60) Spotted owl; 61) Nightjar sp.; 62) House swift; 63) Palm swift; 64) Pied kingfisher; 65) Small blue kingfisher; 66) Whitebreasted kingfisher; 67) Small green bee-eater; 68) bluetailed bee-eater; 69) Indian roller; 70) Hoopoe; 71) Goldenbacked woodpecker; 72) Rufouswinged bushlark; 73) Blackbellied finchlark; 74) Small skylark; 75) Common swallow; 76) Redrumped swallow; 77) Golden oriole; 78) Black drongo; 79) Ashy swallow-shrike; 80) Brahminy myna; 81) Common myna; 82) Treepie; 83) Common wood-shrike; 84) Common lora; 85) Redvented bulbul; 86) Whitebrowed bulbul; 87) Common babbler; 88) Whiteheaded babbler; 89) Large grey babbler; 90) Ashy wren-warbler; 91) Jungle wren-warbler; 92) Tailorbird; 93) Streaked fantail warbler; 94) Plain wren-warbler; 95) Magpie robin; 96) Indian robin; 97) Pied bushchat; 98) Paddyfield pipit; 99) Large pied wagtail; 100) Purple sunbird; 101) Purple-rumped sunbird; 102) Loten's sunbird; 103) Yellow-throated sparrow; 104) Baya weaver bird; 105) Blackheaded munia; 106) Whitebacked munia; 107) Whitethroated munia; 108) Spotted munia.





## Nesting of Common Grey Hornbill

Dr. A.K. RASTOGI

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**W**hile I was enjoying my daily walk in the fine morning of 15th April, 2000, my attention was caught by a pair of common grey hornbill (NN: Indian grey hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris*) which were busy inspecting a hole of about 3 inches in diameter. The hole was about 12 ft. above the ground in the trunk of an African Tulp Tree (*Spathodea campanulata*) situated inside the campus of National Botanical Garden, Lucknow. On the same tree high up 2 nests of pied myna were also present.

**On 18th April** - (Fig. 1) Hole was found closed except for a vertical slit which was just wide enough to admit the beak. Female hornbill seen moving behind this slit.

**9th May** - Beak of the hornbill was seen coming out of the slit and then going back into it. two feathers were seen expelled through the slit, it seemed as if she was cleaning the nest.

**7th June** - Cock hornbill seen feeding her inside the nest. He fed her 3-4 figs of Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) at one time by regurgitation. Figs were deposited in his crop, he made effort to bring one fig to the tip of the beak and then he gave it to his partner inside the nest; the same act was repeated 3-4 times.

**13th June** - (Fig. 2) Vertical slit found partially broken but only one parent seen feeding the family. Today as the cock hornbill came close to the nest feeble voices (*chae-chae*) of the young ones heard.

**14th June** - (Fig. 3) Broken slit found repaired.

**22nd June** - (Fig. 4) Slit found enlarged. Her confinement ended on this day.

**27th June** - (Fig. 5) Slit found repaired, but only one parent seen feeding the nestlings.

**10th July** - (Fig. 6) Wall found totally broken, nothing seen inside the nest, no trace of family in the vicinity.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

### Summary :

- 1) Wall to cover the opening of the hole was completed in just 3 days.
- 2) Partial damage to the wall on 13th June might be due to some predatory animal.
- 3) Young ones' voices were heard 1 month and 25 days after the completion of the wall.
- 4) Mother left the nest when the nestlings were 14 days old. Her confinement period was 2 months and 4 days.
- 5) 27 days taken by the nestlings to be mature enough to leave the nest.
- 6) Cock hornbill was seen at the nest only while feeding his partner. He was never seen sitting leisurely in the vicinity of the nest. Except on 15th April, both parents were never seen together at the nest. This behaviour posed difficulty in locating the nest.
- 7) Complete nesting activity took 2 months and 26 days.

### References :

- Dewar, Douglas; A Bird calendar for Northern India 1916, W. Thacker & Co., London, Pages 78, 95.  
 Ali, Salim; The Book of Indian Birds, 12th Edition 1996, Oxford University Press. Pages 202, 313.



## How Birds make use of Nature's Medicine Chest

S. RANGASWAMI

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**I**wish to share with readers of NLBW some surprising facts contained in an article by Bryant Furlow published in *New Scientist* dated 22 January 2000. It is titled "Kills all known germs" and starts with the question : "Why do so many birds groom themselves with ants or seek out special greenery to line their nests ? They are just following a healthy and hygienic routine". Also this article makes me feel that there is much scope for birdwatchers to study minutely how birds seek remedies for the many problems that bedevil their day-to-day survival.

Bryant Furlow's interest in how birds combat ecto-parasitic invaders has helped reveal how birds combat them by tapping nature's medicine chest. Many species fumigate their nests with plants to boost the health of their offspring and prolong their survival. And birds commonly groom their feathers with ants so they can benefit from the insect's antibiotic secretions. But perhaps the most bizarre therapy of all belongs to the owls that nest with a live snake to keep parasites in check. Nearly a fifth of all screech owl nests have a resident blind snake that normally lives underground. Fred Gehlbach and



Robert Baldridge from Baylor University in Texas, found that these marooned snakes which survive on a diet of arthropod larvae make life easier for the chicks. "Could this be why parent owls bring the snakes to their nest unharmed? Nobody's sure. But chicks reared in nests containing snakes do grow faster and are much more likely to survive than those grooming up without a snake in the family". An avian trick worth emulating say the scientists. Whether the bird's medical knowledge is learned or innate, we could still benefit from it, says Furlow.

"Birds are flying petridishes, teeming with microbes inside and out" says Dale Clayton, a parasite ecologist from the University of Utah. It has long been known that some birds add fresh green foliage to their nests. One idea is that greenery helps keep the nests very humid; another is that it shades chick from direct sunlight.

But both the theories can be countered. Peter Wimberger from the University of Puget Sound in Washington states that if the humidity theory is valid, why should nests of such birds have green foliage in rain forests and maritime climates? He also points out that you find greenery in shady nests beneath the forest canopy and in spherical nests, where chicks are protected from the sun.

Indeed, over the years it has become clear that birds nesting in well-shaded, high-humidity tree cavities or covered nests use green foliage more often than open-cup nesters. South American monk parakeets, for example, are rain forest birds that spend all year in massive colonies resembling ramshackle apartment blocks. Each nest is covered and they are stacked one upon another, sometimes 15 storeys tall. Monk parakeets bring green leaves to their nests from the surrounding forest but only during the breeding season.

Back in the mid-1980s Wimberger noticed that birds of prey also use greenery at very specific times. They regularly replenish the sprigs in their nests while their nests are incubating and shortly after hatching. He realised that offspring would be most vulnerable to parasites at this time and wondered whether parents might be taking advantage of the volatile, defensive chemicals that some plants have evolved to combat local infections and evade herbivores. It was the first hint that greenery might be there to kill the bird's own parasites. Wimberger reasoned that if his medication idea was correct, the birds most vulnerable to parasites would also be most likely to resort to herbal remedies. Some birds like those nesting in tree cavities made by other animals must reuse nests from a previous year. Other birds, like many raptors, simply choose to use the same nest again and again. The risk of infestation from parasites that can kill whole broods is much higher in these nests and so these birds would need to evolve more sophisticated ways to fight disease than the one building pristine nests from scratch each season.

Wimberger studied 49 species of North American and South American birds of prey. What he found confirmed his suspicion. Nearly 80 per cent of nest re-users, including bald eagles, northern goshawks and common buzzards, ferried fresh green to their nests. Of those birds that build new nests each year such as the tawny owl and dark, chanting goshawk, barely 40 per cent use green leaves.

Since Wimberger's ground-breaking study, other research has confirmed the link between foliage use and nest reuse in songbirds. But if this is for herbal fumigation, the leaves brought to the nest ought to be rich in volatile compounds that harm parasites. And this is what researchers are finding. In India, for example, house sparrows nest throughout the breeding season with neem leaves, which contain sitosterol, which is a natural insect repellent and also disrupts egg-laying in ticks and other blood sucking parasites.

There are researchers who do not agree with this interpretation, like Peter Fauth from the University of Maryland. He suspects that bringing leaves is part of courtship display. However, he and his team admit that they washed their nest boxes with chlorine bleach just before the experiment to prevent "ectoparasite contamination". Also it must be said that just because greenery attracts mates it does not mean that it doesn't fumigate the nest. Females may simply prefer mates that protect their nests well against parasites, points out Enrique Bucher of the University of Cordoba. Evan Helga Gevlinner of Max Planck Institute of Andechs, Germany confirmed that starlings prefer to adorn their nests with leaves containing natural antibiotics and insecticides though he believes that greenery is a sexually selected ornament to secure more than one mate following the same rule as peacock trains.

If nests are hotbeds for diseases, plumage also suffers the same fate. A new study by Edward Butt and Jann Ichida of Ohio Wesleyan University shows that bacteria can destroy adult plumage more quickly than anybody suspected. In test tubes, chicken feather inoculated with bacteria from wild birds' feathers rapidly fell to pieces. But they did point out that feathers on wild birds may not be humid enough to support the high levels of humidity they saw in test tubes. Still, bacteria are capable of degrading adult plumage, making flight less efficient and disrupting feathers' capacity for insulation.

Clayton believes that adult preening, dust-bathing and perhaps even annual moulting are evolutionary adaptations to the survival challenges posed by microbial feather-busters. "Dusting and sunning may play a role in microbial defence by making the plumage too dry to support bacteria", he speculates. He also believes that "anting may reduce bacteria by allowing birds to acquire antibiotic secretion from the metapleural glands of ants". - secretions which contain compounds such as auxin and beta-hydroxy fatty acid. So anting may help birds fight off infections. 'Anting' - need not necessarily involve ants. It is only a hygienic procedure in birds. Birds have been seen anting with millipedes, marigold flowers and the tobacco in cigarette butts.

Grackles and starlings even anoint themselves with gardener's moth balls - meant to repel caterpillars from the vegetables. Marigold petals contain sitosterol like margosa leaves used by house sparrows in India. Clayton once watched a grackle anting with pieces of a discarded lime fruit in a city park. Lice taken from doves and kept overnight in a dish with a small piece of lime died in large numbers; many of these had not even come in contact with the lime, but appeared to be dying.

How birds select their medication is a mystery!





## CORRESPONDENCE

**A SHORT TRIP TO BANDIPUR - SOME UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS.** Dr. A.R. PAI, 12, Kumara Park East, Bangalore 560 001

Common teal, numbering about 1000, were sighted in Shettykere, just past the Mysore Airport. Interestingly, ALL of them were fast asleep with their heads on their backs at 8.30 in the morning. They were bobbing up and down in the water undisturbed by the traffic noise.

The second uncommon sight was on my return from Bandipur. In the same lake, about 50 spotbilled pelicans were swimming in a line alongside one another. They were dipping to fish and coming up, moving slowly forwards in a single line. They were driving the fish forward by swimming in a line and then dipping their heads down to catch them. They were community fishing.

The next interesting sight was a red wattled lapwing diving to chase away a jackal, screaming alarm at the same time because the nest was on the ground in a field next to a small bush. The jackal had arrived hoping to catch the fledglings for a snack. Ultimately, he was deterred.

We were surprised to spot the great Indian horned owl hopping from tree to tree, in short flights, along the same direction in which our jeep was travelling. He seemed determined to do something. After following him for about 200 yards, I suddenly discovered that he was actually hunting for a monitor lizard which was running on the jeepable road in front of us. The owl was actually targeting this animal which eventually jumped into a pool of water and escaped. Unfortunately, we came in the way of his getting his dinner.

**The birds sighted during this trip are as follows :**

Spotted owl; White breasted kingfisher; Drongo; Red wattled lapwing; Spotbilled pelican; White ibis; Painted stork; Purple moorhen; Pariah kite; Spotted dove; Little grebe; Grey partridge; Pied wagtail; Bluewinged parakeet; Golden backed woodpecker; Green barbet; Jungle fowl; Red whiskered bulbul; Coppermith; Grey hornbill; Nilgiri verditer; Magpie robin; White browed fantailed flycatcher; Small egret; Pied kingfisher; Bush lark; Little cormorant; Grey heron; Black ibis; White necked stork; Brahminy kite; Common myna; Common teal; Coot; Indian robin; Yellow wagtail; Rose ringed parakeet; Hoopoe; Peacock; Red vented bulbul; Coucal; Little minivets; Crested hawk eagle; Shikra; Great Indian horned owl; Brown wood owl; Green bee-eater; Jungle babbler; Indian roller; Paddy field pipit; Tailor bird; Indian shag; Common sparrow; White headed babbler; Rufous backed shrike; Purple rumped sunbird; Paddy field warbler; Crested serpent eagle.

I have used commonly understood names of birds and have not put their generic names in brackets. I hope the keener ornithologist will excuse me for not using the latin names, which I over-use in my own profession !



**BIRD LIFE IN MID JANUARY ON A SHORT TRIP TO KODAGU.** Dr. A.R. PAI

A volery of birds were seen in a lotus pond just outside Periyapatna. There were congregations of purple moorhen,

white ibis, black ibis and cormorant. There were just two sub-adult bronze winged jacana. Several coots and little grebe were seen fishing. Small egrets, large egrets and paddy birds were in the periphery of the pond. There was a raft of ducks - lesser whistling teals. White breasted waterhen were busy foraging. We alighted from the car and witnessed this collection from the roadside.

Continuing our drive we saw painted stork, brahminy kite, pariah kite, black winged stilt, white necked stork from the car. Walking early morning, the next day, in a thickot cum coffee plantation area spread over 12 acres of land the following birds were seen.

Yellow wagtail; tailor bird; purple rumped sunbird; small green bee-eater; Indian robin; bay backed shrike; grey hornbill; jungle babbler; black winged kite; little scalybellied green woodpecker; white breasted kingfisher; racket tailed drongo; tree pie; yellow cheeked tit; goldenbacked woodpecker; blue winged parakeet; red whiskered bulbul; rose ringed parakeet; orange headed ground thrush; spotted dove; iora; green barbet; coppermith; bush lark; bush chat; scarlet minivet; coucal; drongo; hill myna; common myna; golden oriole; jungle fowl; spotted munia; koel; red vented bulbul.



**COMMENTS ON THE NEWSLETTER.** LAVKUMAR KHACHAR, 646, Vastunirman, Gandhinagar 382 022

This is something more to add to my responses to Vol. 40 No. 4, July-August 2000 NLBW. The Ornithological Tour of B.R. Hills at K. Gudi makes interesting reading but I have some comments — always so easy to make about other people's compositions and creations (!) — This initialing places is rather confounding, but given the long southern names, I suppose has to be accepted. Surely the D.M. sacred grove must be far, far older than a thousand years ? It would go back into prehistory. A temple constructed may be dated, trees may be aged, but not the site. The author's language is delightfully evocative "after a little bit of lunch and shopping we drove towards Srinagar complex and as courtesy would demand we met the OCF Mr. R.M. Ray who sits in his offices of the jungle lodge there and after confirming our reservations at K. Gudi we continued ...." In the next para we have "45 members of northern shoveller, 30 members of the Eurasian blackwinged stilt, 2 members of the painted stork, 2 members of the globally threatened spot-billed pelican ...." Then, surely, the racket tailed drongo's call cannot be confused with that of the tree pie (!) though the former would mimic the latter. Perhaps Dr. Uttangi may like to reconfirm the bird "tripping among fallen leaves" in a "most attractive" manner is indeed a *Motacilla flava* and not *M. cinerea*. I could not but smile at the huge tree growth is quaint in design ...." A very enjoyable article feelingly written though the scientist in the author comes apparent by nothing other than his thanking" the driver of the open jeep, Mr. Longa, for his careful driving on the narrow 5 feet wide forest road, up and down the ghats". The next time I find myself south with the wintering shovellers, I will make it a point to visit this obviously delectable place and thank Dr. Uttangi for taking the trouble of writing for us all to read. I know how difficult it is for a scientist who writes scientific papers to do so for popular consumption and we all must "thank you, Sir" for having taken the trouble.



Capt. Jaideep Chanda might recheck the identity also of the Terek sandpiper on Day II and Finn's weaver on Day III needs to be rechecked (I am glad there is a "?" to the name) since the birds will be out of their breeding plumage and may well be confused with the other commoner and more widely dispersed weavers of the subcontinent.

In response to Dr. Arunachalam Kumar's report of the rogue frog I have a similar experience which I should have reported. Last monsoon, a peahen had hatched five chicks in a friend's large garden. There is an attractive water body inhabited by several large frogs, fish, flapshelled turtles and is visited by the usual assortment of birds to fish, drink, bathe and merely (presumably) to admire their reflections in the water. One morning, one of the pea chicks was found in the jaws of a frog and rescued in the nick of time. In the ruckus, the peahen flew over the compound wall and since the garden has several mongoose, snakes, veranus and avian predators, the flightless chicks were captured and raised in captivity — they are now fully fledged peafowl and have joined the wild birds. Coming back to the frogs, your teenage daughter should not be indignant at her "Freddie" since frogs are voracious predators and capture astoundingly large animals. If several frogs are confined in a restricted space, they will readily swallow their fellows as large as themselves! In fact large frogs are a danger to small newly hatched ducklings, moorhens, coots, etc. While a koel is too large to tackle, "Freddie" must have grasped the leg mistaking it for a worm of sorts. The frog was merely responding to basic instinct to grab something that moves — the koel could have made it let go had it jabbed Freddie with its beak as I presume a pond heron or a cormorant would do but then frogs are not part of a koel's normal experience.



**NESTING COLONIES OF THE LITTLE CORMORANT (PHALACROCORAX NIGER) AND NIGHT HERON (NYCTICORAX NYCTICORAX) IN PUNE CITY, MAHARASHTRA.** KIRAN PURANDARE, 62/A, "Prashant", Erandawane-Gaonthan, Pune 411 004

On 28th September 1996, while birdwatching in the Kamla Nehru Park situated in the heart of the city, I located four active nests of the little cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*). The adult cormorants were incubating eggs. The cormorants were using abandoned nests of the black-crowned night heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). One of the 186 large trees in the park, one particular Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) tree was selected for nesting. The nests were clustered in the top canopy of the Peepal tree. When I measured the height from the ground, it was found to be about 10 meters. During the period of observations taken on 24th September I did not record any interaction between the cormorants and night herons. However, on 24th September I saw two adult cormorants flying overhead. They subsequently landed on the Peepal tree. It was also found that the night herons had shifted their nesting sites to an African Mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*) tree and left the Peepal tree for nesting to the little cormorants. More than forty nests of the night herons were counted. Most of their nests were concentrated on the outstretched branches of the Mahogany tree.

When I asked the Park Manager Mr. Arun Abhyankar he informed me that the common mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsi*) has been regularly seen preying upon the juvenile night herons fallen from the nests.

Little cormorants are commonly found on the Mula-Mutha river and are regularly seen in the evening in small flocks of about 30 to 40 birds while returning from their foraging grounds. They have been observed roosting on a private island in the Mula-Mutha river near the Bund Garden area which is about 5 km. away from the nesting sites.

According to my knowledge this is the first record of the little cormorants and the night herons nesting in the city.



**A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ABOUT BARHEADED GEESE.** PRAKASH GOLE, Ecological Society, 1B, Abhimanshree Housing Society, Off. Pashan Road, Pune 411 008

Birdwatchers are requested to kindly send me information on the numbers, name of place (Dist. State also), habitat, flock size, dates of arrival and departure and any other details they think fit about barheaded geese (*Anser indicus*) seen during this winter.



**CHANGING BY A SNIPE.** Lt. Gen. BALJIT SINGH, "Sakhua", P.O. McCluskie Ganj, Dist. Ranchi, Bihar 839 208

Recently a friend had warned that if I persisted with remaining static on my feet stork-like often, I might invite varicose veins on my calves. But on the morning of February 25 at 0815 AM, I was left with little choice than stand stock still for fifty five minutes, leaning my right shoulder against a tree to steady the binoculars. All this while the bird remained on a patch of mud, ooze, water and rock altogether measuring about one meter radius. I was left puzzling how much of the favoured feed there was on that tiny space or was the feed so scanty that the bird had to persevere so diligently, pausing not even for one moment? On balance I settled for the former situation or else he should have switched places which were in plenty. That the bird was a snipe, I had no doubt. But which one, I had no idea yet!

He would be about thirty paces from me and my power ten binoculars afforded me good visual study. Although the bird is listed by all books as a common winter visitor to the subcontinent but I had never expected to stumble on one around McCluskie Ganj (23° 38' N 84° 57' E 472 MASL) because it is not the habitat that I would associate with snipe. My morning walk had taken me past a rain storage pond. Over the years this pond has sprouted varied and a lot of aquatic vegetation. And as the water shrinks, the freshly exposed pond bed provides rich fare to terrestrial and water birds.

At first look this morning there were two white breasted waterhens and also two pond herons. While the former frisked about cheekily on water's edge, the latter could have been statues. Then the silence was penetrated by the call of a wagtail in flight and it was in the attempt to spot and identify



it that I noticed the snipe. The excitement over, of having seen the first snipe here in ten years, I took pains to note such striking features which would aid in its identification. What struck me as the two most diagnostic elements, the first was the three broad, rich dark brown furrows from the mantle all the way down to the rump region. These three brown furrows were distinctly delineated by four, thick buff-white stripes creating an overall pattern effect similar to the five striped palm squirrels! As I was to learn, no text in any bird book (I have only six) will tell you of this feature but if ever you happen to see this bird next, facing directly towards you, beak inside slush, head fully lowered and body slanted to about thirty degrees you will see these furrows and never forget the sight.

Despite the leisurely fifty five minutes, uninterrupted viewing, I am none the certain whether the furrows also ran unbroken past the mantle upto the crown or whether indeed there was just one dark brown furrow from the nape onto the crown, flanked by two very distinct buff-white stripes? The reason is that from the nape to the tip of the beak there was constant movement of either jabbing the beak into the mud, or consuming the morsels which kept the image in the binoculars flickering agonizingly.

The second significant diagnostic feature to species identity came to light when the bird offered me a broad-side profile. There was an unmistakable orange-rusty colouration (in clear contrast with the otherwise dominant brown) on the terminal edges of the upper tail feathers. Yet surprisingly not one of my reference books, not even the latest by messers Inskipp and Grimmet talks of it; however the illustrations both in "Birds of the Indian subcontinent" as also in Collins Handguide do justice to this detail. Later I saw this also present in the illustration in the Field guide to the Waterfowl of Asia. I guess the authors of books have perforce to rely more on bird skins in "collections" for building their texts than field experiences.

The bird provided me opportunity to view him from every conceivable angle. At one instant I thought the vent was grey but there was no second chance to confirm. Otherwise from breast downwards to the tip of lower tail feathers, the colouration was sparkling snow white. The almost two inch long beak towards the tip appeared flatish, something akin to a spoonbill's. The throat, the neck and the breast looked buff, light chestnut which in contrast made the eye look an enormous black spot. There were two dark brown semi circles on either flank of the neck as though two segments of an invisible neck collar. The flanks carried light brown bars over white. The over-all impression of the pile of feathers on wings was of rich brown rectangular terraces each offset by buff-white margins. On some impulse just once the bird did spread fully and lift up its wings revealing white underwing coverts and soft light brown and buff white bars on the remaining surface.

Back home, it was through a process of picking clues from the collective texts and illustrations from books I have that I short-listed two birds in contention; the common or fantailed snipe and the jack snipe. But finally the aspect of size and the absence of stripe (furrow) on the crown ruled out the jack snipe in favour of the common snipe.



**TWO UNCOMMON BIRDS RECORDED FROM DARRAH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY IN SOUTH EAST RAJASTHAN.**  
**RAKESH VYAS, ANIL NAIR\* and K. C. JOSHI\*\*, \* 2 P 22,**  
**Vigyan Nagar, Kota 324 005, \*\* D. C. P. (W. L.), Kota Zoo,**  
**Kota 324 001**

Darrah Wildlife Sanctuary is one of the first few sanctuaries of the country. It was a protected forest tract along the Mukandara hills. A number of hunting lodges were built by the erstwhile rulers of Kota. Predominantly, it is a dry deciduous country with a profusion of Dhok or *Anogeissus pendula* with small groves of old and large Ficus trees (*F. religiosa*, *F. bengalensis*) near the hunting lodges and drinking-waterholes created for the wildlife.

A small population of ashy swallow-shrike *Artamus fuscus* was first recorded in May 1997 from Darrah Wildlife Sanctuary. During the summer wildlife census, we saw a small party of small, dumpy, grey coloured birds in association with martins and swallows flying over Jhamara Talai (Tank) and swooping for winged insects in the manner of swallows. The place is 58 Km. from Kota city and 8 Km. from Darrah village. A flock of 17 birds was repeatedly sighted throughout the month. First author had not seen this bird before in any other area of the district and did not see any until 18th April 2000, when a party of 13 swallow-shrikes were seen at Gaddhe Ka Mala, about 4 Km. from Jhamara Talai in the sanctuary area. The birds were sitting huddled close together on a Dhak, *Butea monosperma* tree and once in a while one or two individuals sallied to take flying insects. The compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan (1983) states it to be a resident bird with marked local movement in hills and high rainfall areas. Ashy swallow-shrike is a bird of moist deciduous forests and its association with coconut, date and fishtail palm trees has been noted before. There are a few moist patches in the sanctuary near streams and tanks where Arjuna, Kadam, Mahua (*Terminalia arjuna*, *Mitragyna parviflora*, *Madhuca indica*) are predominant trees. Recent publication on the Birds of Indian Subcontinent (1999) has updated its distributional records and found it to be a locally common but patchily distributed bird with only a few individual records from Rajasthan.

Another uncommon bird in the plains of India is common rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*), which is a bird of higher altitudes but descends to 1500 metre down to plains during winter. During its autumn and spring migration, it has been recorded in south, south-east and east Rajasthan in small numbers. It spends winter months in peninsular and eastern parts of India including east Himalayan foothills. Common rosefinch has not been recorded from the desert area of Rajasthan (Rahmani, 1997). A small number of birds (15) have been recorded at Karera Bustard Sanctuary in 1984 (Rahmani, 1991) and in 1939 Dr. Salim Ali also sighted common rosefinches in the same area. Flocks of upto 50 rosefinches have been reported from Kanha in October-November and February-March (Newton P. N. et al., 1986). In our noteworthy observation, a large flock of about 200 individuals was seen at Laxmipura forest chowki in Darrah Wildlife Sanctuary. There is a thick Bamboo grove within the chowki premises, which harboured these birds in such a large number. The birds were seen bathing in a puddle of water and, were easy to identify. Once they retire in the thicket, it is extremely difficult to observe these very frisky birds. They seldom come in the open or sit on the canopy. We could best observe them during mornings



and evenings, when they chatter noisily and fly in large groups from one thicket to another. The males of this species are extremely colourful with light to dark crimson colour on the head and pink colouration extending to rump, throat and abdomen. The females are drab and no different from female house sparrow except being a little lighter and more streaked. In view of their scarce sighting records and very patchy distribution, it has been found relevant to report these sightings.

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**BANDING OF SARUS CRANE - AN EXCITING EVENT.**  
**RAJEEV CHAUHAN**, General Secretary, Society for Conservation of Nature, 576, Karamganj, Pujabi Colony, Etawah 206 001

Banding of a sarus crane, which is the tallest flying bird in the world, was a provoking event for me in our town Etawah. It was the first memorable chance for me. The banding programme has been started by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in their sarus crane ecology project. Having taken interest in ornithology I wanted to know what is banding, how to do it and why? Bands are made up of plastic, ring shaped and very light. These are put on loosely just above the knee of birds. Too much looseness can be dangerous for the bird because it can slip down and jam the knee. Therefore, the bands are stuck with fast-sticking adhesive. Several coloured bands are used in different combinations to band more number of birds. The colour bands are easily visible from a distance. The bands used by WII were provided by the International Crane Foundation (Wisconsin, USA). Before banding any birds, permission from Chief Wildlife Warden of the concerned state is required.

I wanted to have some practical experience in banding. In January 1998, I met K. S. Gopi Sundar (SRF, WII, Dehradun) at Chilka Wildlife Sanctuary in a Research Training Course organised by WII. He told me that Etawah has the largest population of sarus cranes in India and that WII will establish a field station to investigate the ecology of sarus cranes, where banding also will be carried out. On knowing this I was very happy because it was my desire to attend some banding programme and this was coming true.

When Gopi came to Etawah, we went to see the sarus cranes. During three days of survey we located some families of sarus cranes in agricultural fields and wetlands but I was wondering, how they could be captured? Small birds can be caught by using mist nets, sarus crane is a huge bird and it cannot be

caught by using these nets. It was a very difficult problem, but was solved by accident. We followed a family and Gopi was trying to get some photographs. Seeing this, the family moved away quickly. We followed quickly, and this made the chicks run very fast, but they did not fly. When we saw this we felt that if we covered the chicks from four sides, they could be caught for banding.

After two days we went to the same field along with Sanjay, Deepu and Ram, our friends from Etawah. According to plan, we covered the family from four sides. As our circle became smaller, they tried to escape, but could not. The adults left the chicks and flew for a little distance, from where they started making loud alarm calls. Within a couple of minutes, we caught both the chicks. It was a very exciting event for me because I had never caught sarus crane's chicks before. In 10-15 minutes, two different colour bands were put on the right leg just above the knee of both chicks. During this period, the parents of both chicks were calling continuously. As we released the chicks, the parents came closer and escorted the chicks to a safer place. After this, we planned to band other chicks. We located another solitary chick whose left wing was broken in the middle, so it was very easy to catch. The same method was followed for catching as in previous chicks. Due to the success of both attempts, we were very happy. But in the third case, after one hour of trying, we could not even touch a family with chicks even though the chicks could not fly. This was because these two chicks were older and larger than the chicks we had caught earlier. They could run much faster and longer.

Next day, we tried to catch the chicks of a new family, but did not succeed in the first attempt. Then, taking support from villagers, we tried again. After a few minutes of hard work, we caught them. These chicks were approximately 75 days old, big in size and difficult to capture.

After few days Gopi, Deepu, my younger brother Sanjeev, his friend Virendra and I went to a wetland where a family with a one and half months old chick was living. Catching chicks in wetlands is difficult because chicks can hide behind reeds and it is difficult to run in water. This wetland was small, with reeds and in the middle it was 5 feet deep. The wetland was linear in shape and ran along side the road. After half an hour of hard work, we captured this chick. It was the smallest of that banded chicks, so we were not very careful. Suddenly, this chick pecked at Gopi's eye; if he had no spectacles, it could have blinded him. After this incidence, we were very careful while handling the chicks.

Banding the chicks was a joyous event for a small town like Etawah. In future, it will be a source of new information for everyone.

#### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank K. S. Gopi Sundar who provided this opportunity to band sarus cranes and in the preparation of this article. I also thank Sanjay, Deepa, Ram, Sanjeev, Veerendra and the villagers who helped in the banding.





**OCCURRENCE OF ROSY PELICAN IN DEEPAAR BEEL BIRD SANCTUARY, ASSAM.** BIRHUTI PRASAD LAHKAR & BISWAJIT DEKA, Aaranyak Nature Club, Ever Green, Samanway Path (Survey), P. O. Belicla, Guwahati 781 028

On 9th January 2000, when we were on a regular visit to Deepaar Beel Bird Sanctuary we were surprised to see a lone pelican within a group of greater adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius*, seven lesser adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*, 50+ white-eyed pochard *Aythya nyroca*, five ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, about 500 northern pintail *Anas acuta*, and six common pochard *Aythya ferina*. We observed the pelican through our binoculars and we clearly saw the pinkish yellow bare skin around the eyes which is characteristic of the rosy pelican. When it was on flight we observed its pink legs, black primaries and secondaries, black to off-white towards underwing covers. The rosy pelican is a rare bird except in eastern Assam. The Deepaar Beel has been recently declared a Ramsar site by the Govt. of India.

We are thankful to Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury and Dr. Rathin Barman for their comment on the earlier manuscript. We are also grateful to Dr. Bibhab kr. Talukdar for encouraging us.

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**WHITE-RUMPED VULTURES (GYPS BENGALENSIS) ARE DYING AT INDIAN BOTANICAL GARDEN.** ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N. S. Road, In front of T.O.P., Malda 732 101, West Bengal

On 15th March 2000 I went to Indian Botanical Garden as a part of the field ornithology training course of Zoological Survey of India, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India along with other participants.

The Indian Botanical Garden is situated at Sibpur of Howrah district in West Bengal and is famous for the great age old banyan tree. The headquarters of Botanical Survey of India, Ministry of Environment & Forests is located in the garden premises.

During the whole day trip (0900 - 1800 hrs), led by Sri Kumar Chatterjee & R. C. Basu of Z.S.I., I recorded a large number of dead whiterumped vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) within the premises of the garden. I counted all together 11 dead bodies of WRVs. Some of them fresh (2) and most of them (7) rotten and not eaten by. I found the wings & feathers of dead WRVs scattered through out the garden. I noticed that dead bodies are not even infected by ants or insects. At the end of the day I counted about (60-70) numbers of white-rumped vultures living at the moment in the garden.

In the year 1998-1999, when I went there for birdwatching. I recorded very few death cases and numbers of roosting WRVs were good as compared to the present situation. As informed by Sri Kumar Chatterjee in past years they used to kill WRVs

to control their population as a part of the management of Botanical Garden not to destroy the valuable trees. The largest association group I recorded was 18.



**A NOTE ON HOUSE MARTINS' RINGING PROGRAMME.** L.A. HILL, 8 Merlin Close, Hoveton, Norfolk, NR12 8DW

I have been catching and ringing house martins in 6 villages near here. Last year I caught about 230, and this year, so far, have caught about 197 of which 32 have been retraps from last year. So it keeps me occupied.

The BTO have published two Atlases: on Breeding Birds in Britain; Wintering Birds of Britain, and are now starting on Migrating Birds: and have asked me to write the text for house martins! That's fame for you!! I think they hope to publish it next year.

My wife and I feel that growing old is a wearisome business!



**SOME NEWS FROM GUJARAT.** LAVKUMAR KHACHAR, 846, Vastunirman, Gandhinagar, Gujarat 382 022

Gujarat, one of the finest birdwatching regions on Earth and having produced perhaps the largest number of eminent Indian birdwatchers has received considerable "bad press" thanks to the Narmada activists and the denotification of the Narayan Sarovar Sanctuary. All this has left many of us quite fazed. Is Gujarat doing so badly? Must the state be pilloried for other people's envy at its progress? Well, the Newsletter for Birdwatchers is not where controversies need to be gone into. The fact is that Gujarat even today has some of the finest bird watching venues in the subcontinent and we need to put our act together to highlight this fact. I can very proudly make a claim that we also have a large number of birdwatchers and this fact has been strongly revealed by a group of dedicated individuals starting a newsletter in Gujarati called "Vihang". The upshot is that we are bringing everyone together by forming the tentatively called "The Birdwatchers' Club of Gujarat". I am sure we will be as spectacular as indeed are our bird congregations of flamingos, common and demoiselle cranes, crab plovers and so many other species.

Bill Selovar in San Francisco, half a planet away, can take heart to read that Lalpari outside Rajkot still has the great bird spectacles of forty years ago. We now could take him and any other birdwatchers from America to several spectacular birdwatching venues.

On Sunday, 9th April I was honoured by a group of young friends in Surat by being asked to release a tape of bird calls recorded by a Surat birdwatcher. The recording is outstandingly clear. Present there was a bird photographer from Porbandar who showed us outstanding bird photographs. We are promised an audio-video production on the birds of Gujarat. I am discussing the possibility of developing a bird site on the International website. We have a Gujarati list of standardised bird names, three illustrated pocket books (with a fourth waiting to be printed) are now available in Gujarati.



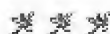
The decade ahead is going to see Gujarat leading in the arena of conservation. We have a strong awareness of what biodiversity is all about and hopefully, by all the birdwatchers coming together we will influence policies.



**PAINTED STORKS ABANDON COLONY AFTER BURSTING OF CRACKERS AT PANDAD, GUJARAT.**  
Dr. S.C. VASHISHTHA, Dist. Immunization Officer, 2/3, Panchayatani, Mission Road, Nadiad, Gujarat 387 002

'Bhal' region belonging to Block - Khambhat and block Matar in Kheda district, is having a number of water bodies with visiting waterfowl. Famous amongst them are Kanewal and Pariej. During my visits to the area during 1996-97 in the months of December and January, I came across a nesting colony of painted storks on the village-side bank of the pond at the entry to village Pandad. More than 300 nests must have been there. According to villagers this colony is there for nearly last 10 years. I could not visit the area in 1996. On my visit on 29-12-99 I was shocked not to see a single nest. Villagers say they were present last year also but after use of fire crackers during some ceremony, they have left the area.

During the same period I have seen another colony of less than 100 nests on the road-side pond in Vill. Khadodhi, Block Khambhat, near Dhuvaran but away from Bhal area. This year there is no water in the pond and villagers have also cut the nesting trees. Interestingly there are also no nests this year. What's the reason? Have they stopped breeding due to scarcity or have shifted somewhere else? Painted storks are seen scattered, maximum seen 30 near a pond in Vatadara. Are there such reports from other areas also?



**VULTURES IN RAJAJI NATIONAL PARK, UTTAR PRADESH.** PRAKASH RAO, WWF India, 172 B, Lodi Estate, New Delhi 110 003

Some interesting news for ornithologists in the post-vulture decline era. I was in Rajaji on the 5th of May 2000 and visiting the Chilla range. Around 0910 hours while moving along the dry river bed I came across a congregation of vultures feeding on a cattle carcass (possibly a dead cattle belonging to one of the Gujar settlements nearby). A total of 151 vultures were recorded from this spot including five species of the total eight which occur in the Indian subcontinent. The break up of the number of vultures at the carcass site included: Long billed vulture 103 with several immatures, white-backed vulture 39, scavenger vulture 4 including 2 immatures, red-headed vulture 2, fulvous griffon 3.

The vultures were generally in a healthy condition and of the entire lot I saw, at least 40-45 were feeding on the carcass while the rest were on trees close by. Elsewhere a further two km away I found two scavenger vultures and a solitary red headed vulture near a dead male spotted deer being scavenged by a jackal.



**ROSE FINCH - WEED DESTROYER OR DISPERSER ?**  
Srs. T. NIRMALA<sup>1</sup> and A. RAJASEKARAN, EIA Division, SACON, 'J.A. College for Women, Periyakulam, Thirai 625 601

Rose finch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*), a migratory bird from Europe, Russia and Himalayas is reported to visit South India during November - December. They feed on seeds, flower buds, fruits and nectar.

We observed rose finches, more than fifty in a flock, at SACON Campus during January-March 2000. These birds were feeding on the inflorescence and seeds of parthenium (*Parthenium hysterophorus* L.) from dawn to dusk, which formed its major diet. Fruits and seeds of weeds such as lantana are reported as their food. Although *Lantana* is available in our campus, these finches were not observed feeding on it. They seemed to prefer *Parthenium* and voraciously feeding on it, an exotic weed, native to West Indies and North Central America. *Parthenium* is said to cause skin allergy, irritation and asthma. *Parthenium* produces chemicals, which inhibit the growth of other plants, a phenomenon known as allelopathy. *Parthenium* is mostly wind dispersed; hairy seeds travel long distances in the wind. Although, the plant is common in human disturbed habitats particularly in the plains, it is very less inside the forest. Birds such as bulbuls, mynas, kools and barbets are known to disperse seeds while birds such as parakeets destroy seeds. In this context, the role of finches is unclear whether they destroy or disperse the *parthenium*.



**MUNIAS ACCEPT ABANDONED NEST OF BAYA.** VEER VAIBHAV MISHRA, Near The Central School, Ram Nagar Colony, Bharatpur 321 001

An abandoned nest of a baya was brought and hung on a bottle-brush tree in my garden. On 1st June 2000, I observed that a pair of white throated munias had occupied it. The munias made some alterations inside the nest. The long neck of the baya nest was opened up in the middle by the munias to enter the nest comfortably. Some alterations inside the nest were also made by adding some nesting materials. Three chicks were observed inside the nest in due course.



**CALLS OF FROGMOUTHS, BATRACHOSTOMUS MONILIGER (BLYTH).** K.V. ELDHOSE, Kavayamplili House, P.B. No. 25, Keerampara P.O., Kerala

As part of study of frogmouths at Thattakkad Bird Sanctuary, Kerala, I was after this nocturnal bird for the last seven months. It is found that there is definite difference in the sound of male and female frogmouths.

As the male moves from the roosting place, it makes a sound "Kwaayinleeff" repeated at an interval of 4-8 seconds. A common sound is also heard - "Vicee-vicee, vicee-vicee". The alarm call when a bird of prey appears is "Kwair", produced by both male and female birds. Sex differentiation done from the call itself is comparatively rare among the birds. Comments from the readers are expected.





## Feathered Friend that Helped Change the Face of Wildlife Conservation

MARK COCKER

Although it still gives me pause for thought, it is an increasingly common sight in north Norfolk - an all-white bird a third the size of a swan, perched in a dead tree. Then off it flies on broad snow-coloured wings to reveal itself as a little egret, a type of heron that is spread across temperate and tropical latitudes from western Europe to eastern Australia.

For much of the time they stand on one leg, hunched and sentinel-like at the water's edge. Then they break out of this immobility into a frenzy of activity. Lured by the glimmer of scattering fry, the egrets plough through the shallows in an almost balletic feeding dance, before stabbing down with a needle-fine bill.

Their presence in Britain is the result of a recent Europe-wide expansion that started in the 1950s. One egret population began a push north from Africa along the Spanish and French Atlantic coastline that culminated in a breeding outpost in Brittany by the 1960s. They were soon present on almost all estuary sites along the southern English coast, and in 1996 the egret was added to the breeding list when a pair reared three young in Dorset. Today there are up to 1,000 egrets present on British wetlands at any one time.

They are an attractive addition to the native avifauna, not just for their dazzling colour but also for their breeding costume, which is distinguished by elongated lacy feathers on the crown, breast and back. They are extraordinary plumes, and they certainly altered the face of international wildlife conservation.

During the 18th and 19th centuries it became the fashion to adorn women's hats with these elegant powder-puff feathers. The trend triggered a massive trade, especially for plumes from the heron family. In India by 1914 the feathers were worth 10-28 times their weight in silver.

The salesroom at a single London auction the previous year received 12,640 ounces of feathers, including 16,000 white crane wing quills, 10,000 bustard plumes, the entire skins of 1,000 emus, 5,000 terns and almost 100,000 egret feathers.

In response to this damage a group of committed women in Manchester set up the Plume League. This eventually metamorphosed into the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which now is one of the largest wildlife non-governmental organisations in Europe. In America a parallel response led to the creation of the Audubon Societies, while an attempt to coordinate measures across the world resulted in the foundation of the International Council for Bird Preservation (now BirdLife International), which has member organisations in more than 100 countries.



Courtesy:- Guardian Weekly, August 17-23, 2000

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Cover : Black-winged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) This almost cosmopolitan species has evolved leg length to its extreme among waders. Stilts frequent marshy areas, lake shorelines, pools and saltpans. They feed in areas ranging from dry mud to belly-deep water; but most often they forage in water about knee-deep. When alarmed this warden of the wetlands, bobs and scolds at the intruder and takes to wings with loud protesting cries, alerting other denizens of the wetland.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS



# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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## **Editorial**

### **Ahmedabad Earthquake**

We have been attempting to find out if all our birdwatching friends in Ahmedabad and Kutch are safe and well. Our attempts to reach them by telephone have failed. We can only hope that in spite of the devastation around them they continue to be in good heart. Our good wishes and deepest sympathies to all their families.

### **Editor Out of Action**

On 22nd December 2000 I had to undergo a by-pass heart surgery and the January/February issue of the Newsletter was

left in the hands of S. Sridhar and Joseph George. Not that they have not helped me before, in fact, Joseph George does the proof reading of every issue - a thankless task very well performed.

I am now back in the Editorial Chair - even though the chair is somewhat broken as my right hand is still only partly functional and editing is an exercise which causes some pain and hence avoided. So kindly overlook the errors. My thanks again to the many birdwatching friends who so willingly offered to donate their blood towards the six bottles which I had to supply to Malya Hospital before the surgeon commenced his job. As of today, 19 February 2001, I am still rather fragile, but I hope that unlike many fragile areas of our world there will be no extinction.

### **Donation to Birdlife International through BNHS IBA Programme**

In the Jan/Feb issue I suggested that the money collected and promised for sponsoring a page of the Globally Threatened Birds be handed over to BNHS for their IBA programme. Readers will recall that we had originally planned to collect Rs. 16,500/- for sponsoring a page for the sarus crane. However, the book has already been published and released in October at the IUCN Conference in Jordan. The amount collected or promised so far amounts to about Rs. 8,500/- and I trust it is in order for this to be handed over to the BNHS. I have spoken to their Director, Dr. Asad Rahmani, and he welcomes the idea. All of you who have not already sent the money, kindly send the amount to the "Newsletter for Birdwatchers", C/o. Navbharath Enterprises, No. 10, Sirur Park, 'B' Street, Seshadripuram, Bangalore - 560 020. S. Sridhar will deal with the problem.

### **\$ 500 (approximately Rs. 25,000/-) offered by Bill Selovar**

May I refer to this pending matter again and request readers to make their suggestions about using this amount for a worthwhile conservation project.

### **Peter Jackson Prize**

In the September/October issue of the Newsletter, I had given details of the proposed Peter Jackson Prize of Rs. 1,000/- to be given to the person who could confirm sighting the largest number of birds during a single day 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. before 31st March 2001. Everyone interested was expected to register themselves with the Editor by 31st December 2000. Unfortunately, no entries have come in, so we will postpone this exercise by a few months, the registration date is now extended to 31st December 2001. Further information will be provided in the July/August or September/October 2001 Newsletter. It could be an exciting exercise and I trust that a few of our leading birdwatchers will participate in the event.

### **Lifescape India Project**

Under the auspices of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Prof. Madhav Gadgil has launched an imaginative project whereby there will be manuscripts written on 1500 life forms of Indian fauna and flora. The first one on butterflies has



already been published. This is a remarkable achievement and is likely to spread an interest in natural history in a wide section of our people. Consequently, it will also result in the conservation of the species involved in the project. Presumably the fact that Salim Ali's book on Indian Birds created such an interest in our birds, persuaded Madhav to make an attempt on similar lines for a wide number of species in India. The Lifescape series is meant not only to interest the average non-specialist reader, but is also designed to stimulate the expert to find out more and more about the species concerned. Altogether it is a project which may have a significant influence on saving the natural resources of our country.

### Crow Project

In the context of the above, this note by Madhav Gadgil in 'Resonance' (Feb. 2001) on crows, indicates how ordinary observations can lead to valuable conclusions.

'Advantages of Communal Roosting - Permit me to cite one example of how an apparently simple observation may lead to interesting scientific inferences. In 1971-72, I spent several months observing a mixed communal roost of house crows, jungle crows and Indian myna on the campus of the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune. I was intrigued by the issue of what was the advantage of such communal roosting. It has been suggested that an important advantage was communication of information on good food sources. Thus birds which had discovered a particularly rich food source the previous day might rapidly fly towards it the next morning. Other birds who had encountered poorer sources the previous day might follow them. But this does not explain why species with very different food habits such as a house crow and Indian myna should form mixed roosts. Formation of mixed roosts may instead be favoured by the advantage of running a lower risk of predation because of a more efficient system of warning in a larger group. During my observations on the mixed communal roosts I noted that the house and jungle crows suddenly shifted the location of their roost one day to another clump of trees about 300 m. away, leaving Indian mynas behind. Four days later Indian mynas too shifted and rejoined the crows. This suggested that the mixed communal roosts did not occur simply because there were just a few good roosting sites. Instead, they seemed to genuinely confer advantage through lowering risk of predation. Since some scientists had dismissed the latter possibility, my simple observations led to an interesting paper in the well-known bird journal, IBIS'.

### New Newsletters and Websites

When our Newsletter was started in December 1959, I do not recall the existence of any others which were concerned with promoting an interest in birds. Today there are a large number of Newsletters concerned with nature published in various parts of the country. One newcomer 'Twitcher' published by the Green Peoples India, Prantapally, Malka 732 101, contains well researched accounts on birds. Similarly, the Samsad News published by the Prakriti Samsad, 65, Golf Club Road, Calcutta 700 033, which has been in existence for some time, contains very worthwhile material.

Today I received an e-mail from Peter Jackson which may be of interest to some of you :

"I wonder if you are aware of two interesting lists to which you can subscribe. One is Nathist-India, and the other, recently established, is Delhibird. It is easy to subscribe - no money involved. For Nathist-India send an email to <vivak@ee-princeton.edu> and for Delhibird delhibird-owner@yahoo.com

For me reading the postings is tantalizing. It seems that Sultanpur has come back to life now that the Irrigation Dept. is providing water, and that another jheel to the west, Bhindawas, is proving very exciting. In an afternoon and following morning, one birder got 144 species! There are some really hot birders in the Delhi region now, as well as elsewhere. The Newsletter should be in contact".

Dr. Ameen Ahmed and his friends have created a website for Karnataka <<http://karnatakabirds.homestead.com/home.html>>

### Living Planet Report

Every year WWF International produce a Living Planet Report giving information about the status of various species and of their habitats. The report of the year 2000 makes depressing reading. There is a considerable decline in forest ecosystems, fresh water species and marine species. There is now a new concept under the heading of Ecological Footprint. This is a conservative estimate of human pressure on global ecosystems. "It represents the biological productive area required to produce the food and wood people consume, to give room for the infrastructure, and to absorb the CO<sub>2</sub> emitted from burning fossil fuels." Like all other statistics this one is also very disturbing. "This exceeds the existing biological productive space per person by about 30%". It is quite clear that the main ecological problem before the world is to reduce the human population. Without this all the other attempts being made are not likely to prove worthwhile.



## Wintering of Greyheaded Flycatchers in Konkan and Western Ghats of Maharashtra

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In a sacred grove at the base of the hill fort of Purandar, near the town of Saswad near Pune, we had spotted for the first time, two pairs of greyheaded canary flycatchers (*Culicicapa ceylonensis*) in early December 2000. The sacred

grove is situated deep in the valley and the vegetation is mainly of large bamboo, tamarind and mango trees. Bamboo is abounding and the clumps are virtually impregnable. The gradient here is almost 60 degrees.



On 17.02.2001, we re-visited this groove, which has the temple of the local goddess Katurjai. We were pleasantly surprised to find the two pairs of greyheaded canary flycatchers busily catching the "invisible" flies and small insects from the air and tree trunks respectively. The paradise flycatcher, red-throated flycatcher, white-spotted fantail, Tickell's leaf warbler, common chiffchaff, greenish warbler, a pair of blueheaded rock thrush, thickbilled warbler, lesser whitethroat, were also present. All these were noted by us in the first visit in December also.

While trying to photograph the greyheaded flycatcher, we entered the bamboo clump. To our surprise a nightjar suddenly took to wing from very close to Amit's shoulder. It was roosting on the bamboo trunk and it silently and rapidly disappeared uphill. As we ascended the hill, we chanced to spot the same bird resting on a horizontal bamboo stem. It was about 25 feet above us and in the middle of the thicket. To get a good photo, Satish climbed the hill, thereby bruising himself liberally, thanks to the bamboo thorns, but managed to reach a point just above the roosting, fast asleep nightjar. We both inched our way through the dense, thorny bushes and bamboo undergrowth to reach three feet or so from the nightjar. Close observation confirmed that it was the winter migrating Syke's nightjar (*Caprimulgus meharattensis*). It is the first record of this nightjar from Saswad region.

Another important confirmation that we could obtain in this second visit, was that the greyheaded canary flycatchers wintered in our area for the entire period. Last year (2000 AD Jan) my friend Vishwas Joshi had observed the same flycatcher wintering in Chiplun (not the same individual pair). It was also accompanied by the blueheaded rock thrush. We also sighted the greyheaded flycatchers at Bhimashankar, in the Western Ghats this winter, and in the Konkan, near Dapoli, at the same time. These birds usually keep to the canopy, making sporadic sallies to lower levels. They are fond of dark areas and seldom come out in the open, making photography difficult. We also saw them fanning the tail in the fantail flycatcher-like manner. Another important observation is their forked tail, which is even easily seen in the darkness of the foliage, against the backlight. The yellow breast and grey head are appreciated in better lighting conditions and the flycatcher may therefore be overlooked.

Wintering of greyheaded flycatchers in parties in Konkan and Western Ghats appears to be a hitherto unrecorded fact. Our friend and a keen birdwatcher, Ram Mone, has also observed this bird wintering at Kalambushi, near Chiplun, Dist. Ratnagiri, for the past two years. R. Grimmer, C. Inskipp and T. Inskipp have described that they winter singly. (Birds of the Indian Subcontinent).



During the last few years I had opportunities to observe some interesting facets of bird behaviour. I wish to reminisce upon them. Many were unique, strange & previously unreported. Let me describe the events in the hope that it will invite responses from the readers. The observations were made at various places at Wynad in Kerala. Some were made elsewhere in Kerala state (as stated in the text). Most of the observations were made during 1998-2000.

#### Behaviour of Juvenile Crested Honey Buzzards

On June 5th 1998 at Kuppadi on a thoroughly rainy day with leeches galore, we Nirmal (my son), myself, Kiran & Arun (my nephews) slogged through the boggy trails near the stream at Kuppadi. We saw one or two flying lizards (*Draco volans*) with red 'wings' if not many interesting birds. We were bored enough to return prematurely when we heard some Keee-Keee calls originating from a pair of immature crested honey buzzards. One parent bird too was nearby apparently feeding them. The young were almost as large as the adults and they were seen opening their beaks while making the calls as if begging for food. The young were pallid and ragged. We observed them for atleast half an hour heedless of the attention of the leeches, satisfied about the outcome of the trip in the monsoon.

## Some Notes on Bird Behaviour

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#### Parental Behaviour of Greybacked Shrikes when offspring are threatened

On June 12th at Kolagappara, Wynad, I sighted a greybacked shrike chick, coursing through the undergrowth like a mouse running in a sinuous manner. Both its parents were sitting in a hedge, making *kre-kre* like calls, spreading their tails & waving their wings. They were attracting attention towards themselves to distract observers from the chick.

#### Dusky Crag Martins Nesting

On July 3rd 1998 while waiting at the State transport bus station at Sultan's Battery, I saw dusky crag martins repeatedly carrying away mud churned up by the bus tyres for nest-building, making creative use of the mess made up by the man!

#### Flowerpeckers maligned for more than their share ?

Most people think flowerpeckers do feed upon *Loranthus* nectar & fruit only. Sure they do, but on many an occasion I have seen them spending a lot of time feeding on other flowers. When *Salmalia* flowers abundantly in December to March, I have observed Nilgiri flowerpeckers feeding on their abundant nectar at Kolagappara in Wynad in January 99 & thick billed flowerpeckers, at Vazachal (in Trichur Dt in Dec. 98). I suppose they don't hold the *Loranthus* berries in much esteem when other food is available to them in plenty. Before branding them



entirely as "Loranthus Spreaders" the role of other birds like sunbirds who also partake meals from Loranthus has to be studied. I have also noted white-eyes feeding on Loranthus fruits.

#### False nest holes by Woodpeckers

Some woodpeckers namely, Malherbe's Mahratta & The Black were observed at various occasions to make partly excavated holes. After excavating for sometime they abandon these holes and begin new ones. In the case of Malherbe's woodpecker neat vertical rows of holes may be seen, one of them may be an actual nest hole. I have seen 4-5 such holes in a vertical row. Mahratta woodpeckers too were noted to make 1 or 2 additional nest holes. Black woodpeckers too were observed to make such false nest holes but were in an irregular zigzag vertical row, 4 in number.

#### Song & Associated Display By Spotted Babblers

While doing the Chinnar Bird Survey with Mr. Sathyan, an avid birdwatcher & photographer in Jan 1999 I had a pleasant surprise of seeing a group of spotted babblers. I have only rarely seen them in groups of more than 3. But here there was a group of 6 individuals and they were hopping in a line. And they were singing! The member who was going in the foremost position was observed to have partly spread its wings and keeping it depressed and was vibrating them. Also its breast feathers were seen fluffed and vibrating. The tail too was kept depressed and was being wagged or rather vibrated side to side. The others were following the 'leader' in a loose Indian file. I cannot say whether the 'leader' only made the song. The song was a multinoted one that lasted upto one minute or so. They were like school boys who were let out of school a few hours earlier than the scheduled time. Later I observed similar behaviour with song, going in a line displaying with wings & tail etc at. Kuppadi in Wynad where I regularly go for birdwatching. It is worth a closer study but the birds are very sulky. This call may not be its breeding call since this call is heard during all the months. The breeding call I suppose is the *Piwee-wi-Piwee-wi* call heard, during the breeding season, the bird calling hiding in undergrowth, the call having a ventriloquistic quality. By the way the birds seen at Chinnar had their crowns more ruddy in colour which was not surprising because spotted babblers found south of Palghat gap have more chestnut in their crowns than in birds found in north like at places like Wynad. Even so they have similar customs! or to put it into jargonese - social behaviour.

#### Altruistic parental behaviour by Spotted Babbler

An instance of parental concern of birds when their offspring are put in risky situations was noted by the author when a spotted babbler chick was seen. It was noted only because its parent very unnaturally moved to one side uttering a particular - kre, which made me move towards the origin of its rush. I thought that it might have been threatened by some predator, when I became aware that it was I who was being distracted by the parent bird by exposing itself - the usually sulky bird. This happened in March 1999 in my pepper garden at Kolagappara in Wynad. The young bird was a ragged and

ruffled one. A single chick alone was seen. I saw it around the same spot two or three times more. It was very wary and when it sensed the presence of man it tried to go and hide still in the base of pepper plants where there is some thick growth of roots.

#### Protective self-exposure of parent Bulbuls

This sort of protective behaviour i.e. exposure of the parent (for example broken wing display) was seen by the author once by a parent red-whiskered bulbul. When approached very close to its nest in a meter high hibiscus plant to examine the nestings, the parent bird ran away dragging its wing partly folded as if it was broken. To prove whether the behaviour is accidental the author approached 4-5 times, elicited the same behaviour and verified it. This too was at Kolagappara, Wynad.

#### Mimicking of Shikra calls by Bronzed Drongos

In March-April 1999 at the same place bronzed drongo was seen nesting in a small jack tree (in 1998 a pair - ? the same was seen nesting in the same tree - unfortunately the nest was destroyed by workers who were regulating shade by lopping off branches of trees). Nearby there was the nesting activity of shikras. One day the author was astounded by the call of shikra coming from very near the nest of bronzed drongo. It was just the bronzed drongo mimicking. Was it just for the fun of it (just as racket tailed drongos mimic cats mewling) or does it do intentionally to repel intruders?

#### Some observations on the breeding of Mahratta Woodpeckers

Mahratta woodpeckers were observed twice by me nesting in my pepper garden at Kolagappara in Wynad. Once it was in 1993, but the nest was not completed before it was usurped by yellow throated sparrows. On 7th February 2000 in the evening, at the same area, my attention was drawn by the 4 noted call of a male Mahratta woodpecker *Chi-lip--Chi-lip--Chi-lip--Chi-lip*. It was later observed to enter a round hole in a dried up arecanut tree trunk. During the next week the male and female were seen in the vicinity frequently. For the next four weeks I was unable to visit the place. I visited the place on 21st March & saw a female Mahratta woodpecker taking an yellow coloured cricket to the above nest hole. It alighted on a nearby tree. It was very hesitant to enter the hole. Only after waiting for about 5 minutes it entered the hole. It totally disappeared into the hole and returned after a minute. On the next day the female was seen to enter the nest with a small black spider. This time it was not so wary. On 28th morning, I saw the male feeding from the nectar of *Erythrina lithosperma*. After some time I saw it entering the nesthole. I could not makeout whether it carried any food. All the foregoing observations except the first one was made during my morning walks - from about 7.30 to 8.30 a.m. and hence the hasty and incomplete observations - I had to reach the hospital before 9 a.m.!

However on 29th morning it was my day off and I could watch these birds for a few hours at a stretch. I could observe that

1. The female visited the nest more often with food.



2. The visits with food are at the intervals of 20-30 minutes.
3. As the bird flies in to feed the chicks it makes a click like call.

The bird then alights on the branch of a nearby tree, observes the nest and abruptly enters the nest. After that week I could not follow up my observations for a week and when I next visited the nest a week later it was deserted.

#### **Territorial? / Courtship display of Malabar Trogon**

On 1st May 1999 at Kuppadi in Wynad, Nirmal (my son) and myself observed the Territorial?/Courtship display of Malabar trogon. The female was heard making 'K'yor' like calls at intervals of 5-8 seconds. It was seen lifting its tail up 30 degrees (app) then dropping it down, at each call. After flicking down the tail it was spread laterally so that the white margins were prominent. The same activity was observed in Kuppadi in February 1999 but by a male trogon, however without the 'K'yor' like call. On 2nd September 2000 also such behaviour was noted at Kuppadi.

#### **Increase in the prevalence of Koels in Wynad**

Some 3-4 years back koels were rather uncommon in Meenangady, Kuppadi & Kolagappara, all in Wynad. However now during the summer months, koels are very vocal in the above places. 16 years back when I first reached Meenangady, koels were absent. During this period, human habitations and subsequently the number of crows (mainly jungle crows) have increased. The increase of host species may have caused the proliferation of the parasitic species.

#### **Finding of Blue Chat at the same place at Kuppadi for Several years**

There is a small nullah 2 or 3 meters wide in the evergreen patch of forest just near the entrance of the Kuppadi forest in Wynad. There is a place where you ford the small stream - some half to 1 meter wide, but always with flowing water - even during the peak of summer. The initial profuse bird activity in the morning by the roadside peters out towards the noon. Then the birds are to be found near the shady banks of the nullah. There is a *Myristica* sp. tree with exposed roots extending into the nullah which one uses to aid himself to cross the nullah. In the summer months of 1997, 98, 99 and 2000, I was always able to find a pair of blue chats here, or near a swampy patch of land nearby. Earlier too it was commonly found here during the summer. Usually both male and female were found. But last year only the female was seen. Was it the same pair always I wonder!

#### **Moulting of Racket Tailed Drongo**

In the third week of July, 2000 I had been to Arippa in Quilon Dt. some 50 kms away from Trivandrum, a favourite birding place of Trivandrum-based birdwatchers. I went there along with other birdwatchers. We had about 10 sightings of the racket-tailed drongos. Of these 6 birds were lacking both the streamers of the tail. The other birds had one streamer each. The next week at Kuppadi and Kolagappara in Wynad we could see the same phenomenon. Birds seen in Wynad in August-September had 2 streamers each for their tails

(However a bird seen at Kuppadi on 27th November 2000 had a single streamer) It seems to me that the birds lose streamer of one side first then of the other side and regains the streamers in the same order viz. one side first and then the other side.

#### **Soil-eating behaviour of Yellow Legged Green Pigeons at Dasnaghatta**

Dasnaghatta is a place in the Bogur range of the Wynad Wildlife Sanctuary. There is a waterhole and adjacent protected watch tower from which wildlife coming to drink and bathe can be watched. Dr. Ahmed, Mr. Satyan & myself spent 2 days there in April last week, 2000. I had been to this place some 3-4 times during the last 10 years and I have always seen yellow-legged green pigeons in the vicinity of the waterhole. This time I was able to watch them very closely and I could find out that they are feeding on the soil found in the area. I collected the material which they were feeding upon but it was unfortunately lost. People have reported pigeons feeding upon crumbled whitewash flakes from walls just as chicken eat broken eggshells probably to supplement their calcium intake for egg laying. But I wonder whether all these birds were females! In humans, during pregnancy, while suffering from some mental illness, anaemia and iron deficiency eating clay, earth and lime from whitewash has been observed. The mechanism for this has not been completely explained but lack of some nutrient is suggested and the same may be relevant here.

#### **Roosting behaviour of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**

Tickell's blue flycatcher was observed on many occasions while roosting. It makes a 'chok-chok' call at the intervals of few seconds wagging its tail at each call. It jumps from one branch to another in the same tree for at least a quarter of an hour, uttering the same calls before taking rest.

#### **Is Grey Jungle Fowl monogamous?**

Grey jungle fowl is considered to be mainly a monogamous bird by SA and others (vide HB of Birds of India and Pakistan by SA and DR). But the author has met many a group of grey jungle fowls at various occasions comprising one male and a number of females mostly 1 to 3 in number. And when you consider the behaviour of its close relative, the domestic fowl, there is ample reason to consider it to be polygamous.

#### **Blackbird making 'silent' calls**

On 26th February 1999 at Kuppadi I saw a blackbird opening its mouth widely, raising its tongue the main impression to the observer being it's making a song. But strangely no sound was heard coming forth by the author.

This behaviour was observed later also. During the winter sojourn in Wynad the blackbird esp. in the lowlands of Wynad is silent - ca at a height of 700 meters. (The author has heard the full song of blackbird in the heights of Brahmagiri hills at about the height of 1000 meters in June 1992). The bird may be making ultrasonic or infrasonic sounds inaudible for humans by the way of alarm calls which may be audible to its fellows.

On 26th December 2000 I observed such behaviour ('silent song') by a whitethroated groundthrush at Kolagappara.



### Display of Black Eagle

On 9th April 1999 at Kolagappara I saw the display of a black eagle. First, it dived down from app. 1000 meters, but at app. 500 meters it stopped diving and started to climb, the momentum of the dive helping it to rise high. After climbing some 300 meters it rolled to one side, dived again and repeated the whole performance. This was repeated about 4 or 5 times. No other black eagle was seen in the vicinity at this time.

### Breeding activity of Monarch Blue Flycatchers

When it comes to nest building monarch blue flycatchers are very careless. Almost all the nests observed by me in Wynad were at about 1.5 meters high i.e., exactly at the eye level and pathetically near paths where people walk. So interference by humans is quite rampant - and consequently destruction. In 1996 May, I saw one nest with eggs in a small coffee bush at Kolagappara beside a footpath in my pepper garden. I took some pictures of it. 5 days later when I visited the spot all signs of the nest were missing. In 1998 June another nest was seen with the male and female constructing the nest and later incubating 2 eggs with brown splotches in a buff background. This nest was beside a footpath and very prominent and only at a height of 1.2 meters from ground. Someone carried away the eggs a week after the brooding was started. The same year (possibly the same pair made it) another nest was seen, this time fortunately hidden in a group of Mulberry bushes. But this nest too was unsuccessful as the birds somehow abandoned the nest.

### Courtship of Pygmy Woodpeckers

The courtship behaviour of the pygmy woodpeckers reminds one of a song & dance sequence from an old hollywood film. I saw one pair engaged in courtship activity in Mar 1999 at Kolagappara. The male chased around the female which then alighted on a tree trunk at a height of some 2 meters in the typical woodpecker fashion. It cocked its head to one side spread its wings at the same time pressing its tail to the tree trunk and making 'chi' - 'chi' calls. The male then flew at the female making similar calls whereupon the female flew away to another tree and repeated its act. This was enacted 3-4 times before the pair flew off.

### Feeding of chicks by Spotted Munia

4 spotted munia chicks were observed at Kolagappara (in March 1998) being fed by 2 adult birds. The chicks were almost fullgrown. The insides of their gaping mouths while begging for food with muted 'kra' - 'kra' calls were seen to be yellow in colour.

### Arrival of Pittas

This year (2000) the Pitta's calls were first heard at Manantoddy, Wynad in the second week of October. Their arrival is characterised by the 'Wee-wit' like call. I was astounded by another raptor-like call which I had not heard

before. Somewhat like 'Vveee'. The strange thing is that birds like bulbuls, tailor birds & magpie robins acted as if a raptor was at large, scrambling beneath the bushy undergrowth as if to escape attention from the 'raptor'. In the evenings the pittas made only the usual 'woo-wit' calls. During the first week of the arrival of the birds they were seen to chase each other (may be establishing their territories). Also the calls during the first 5 weeks were at 7 a.m, their clocks running only 5-6 minutes behind or before the exact time. Later, the morning calls were heard without the raptor-like component. The frequency and number of calls as well as their chronicity became lesser as weeks passed. By the 3rd week of November, only one or two calls were heard in the evening and occasionally in the mornings. Even then usually the 2 noted calls were heard. Only on rare occasions the single-noted 'raptor' like call was heard. The calls were more apt to be heard if the sky was overcast.

### Roosting Behaviour of Brown Shrikes

At Manantoddy in Wynad itself, this year, the roosting behaviour of brown shrikes was observed. At about 6.30 p.m. they start their 'chek' - 'chek' - 'chek' - like calls sitting upon an exposed stump or bush. Some 10 to 14 'chek' are made at a stretch these sequences being made by one bird. As if answers, another bird some 50 meters away starts similar sequence of calls. After calling for some 15 minutes or so the birds tire out and their calls cease. These 'duets' were common around the time of their arrival in September - October. Like pittas' calls these too diminished after a few weeks.

### Displacement Activity by Jungle Nightjar

Observed jungle nightjar making characteristic *kut-roo-kut-roo* call at Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary at Thattakad in Emakulam Dt., Kerala on 7th December 2000 at about 9 p.m. in a moonlit night. Was accompanied by Mr. Jijo an expert birdwatcher based at Thattakad and some other participants at the butterfly survey, conducted there from 8th to 10th December 2000. The calls were answered by another individual some 30 meters away forming a duet. We flashed a powerful torch at the source of the calls and found the eyes of the bird. The outline of the bird could be made out by binoculars and the bird identified as a nightjar. When light was shown at first, the bird stared at it for a few seconds, then started pecking with its beak at the ground making motions of feeding. This behaviour was repeated many times. It should have been reacting to the stimulus of strong light with pecking motions - an instance of displacement activity, like people fidgeting when stared upon.

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## Some Aspects of the Developmental Biology of the Red Vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* : The Nestling's Food and Feeding Pattern, and the Feeding Behaviour of their Parents



### Introduction

The red vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, primarily a bird of scrubby jungle, is encroaching upon various rural and urban habitats including human dwellings in recent years with concomitant proximate acquaintance with man. This in turn has given opportunities to study quite a few aspects of its reproductive biology. (Dellary and Desai, 2000; Desai, 1993, 1995 a & b and 1997; and Vijayan, 1980). In this paper the food of the nestlings of *P. cafer* and feeding behaviour of their parents have been described.

### Materials & Methods

The food and feeding patterns of the nestlings of the passerine bird *Pycnonotus cafer* (Passeriformes : Pycnonotidae) at two sites No. 1-2 during April - May, 1993 and May 1996 from day one to the last day of nestling phase have been studied. The observations were made uninterruptedly from 5.00 a.m. till dusk when the parent birds stopped feeding the nestlings and themselves retired for roosting. The movements of the birds to-and-fro the nest could be easily observed from a distance of 5-6 m without disturbing the birds. The number of visits to the nests were recorded every hour on each day.

The data was split into two halves while plotting the graph to find out, 1) if there were any similarities in the feeding patterns between the first and second halves of the nestling phase at each site; and 2) if there was any uniformity in the feeding patterns at both the nesting sites. The data has also been statistically processed to ascertain if the differences between the maximum and minimum hourly feeding rates were significant or not.

While the feeding birds were arriving at the nest, the type of food in their beak was ascertained with the help of a field binocular (PENTAX - 16 x 50), if it was fruit pulp, a seed or an insect. Meeting the water demand of the nestlings by the parent birds is also an equally important duty of the latter. From this point it was also closely observed if the parent birds ever returned to the nests with their feathers wet to provide water to the nestlings.

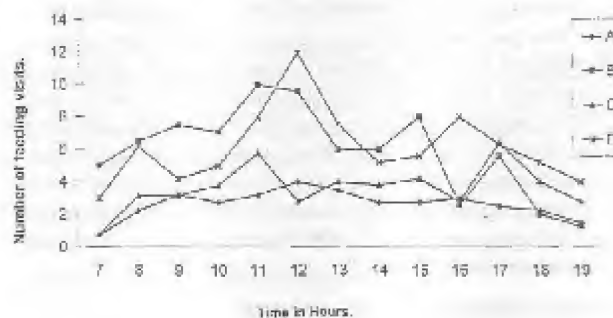
### Observations and Discussions

The nestling phase of *Pycnonotus cafer* was often to twelve days. During this phase the nestlings were fed by the parents from dawn to dusk. In the initial stage the food consisted of mainly the succulent pulp of the fruits of *Sapota* (Fam. Sapotaceae) and *Phyllanthus distychnus* (Fam. Euphorbiaceae); during the mid-phase they were fed with pulp

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of the fruits of *Santalum alba* (Fam. Santalaceae) and *Sapota*; and in the final stage, they were also fed with small and freshly killed nymphs of grasshoppers of *Chrotagonus* sp. On one occasion a small fingerling of the fish *Gambusia* sp. was fed to a chick.

During the nestling phase at both the sites the feeding activity commenced around 6.00 a.m.; it rapidly increased to reach the peak by mid-day; this was followed by a decline within two to three hours. A slight rise was again noticed between 4.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m. By 7.00 p.m. the feeding activity was completely stopped (Graph). The hourly rates of feeding on each day during the first and second halves of the nestling phase were  $2.65 \pm 0.23$  and  $5.94 \pm 0.72$  respectively at site No. 1. Though the feeding rates were almost double during the second phase than those during the first, the general pattern of feeding remained almost the same throughout the nestling phase (Graph). At site No. 2 these values were  $3.66 \pm 0.37$  and  $6.18 \pm 0.62$  respectively (values are expressed as mean  $\pm$  standard error). The differences between the maximum and minimum values at each of the sites are statistically significant (At site No. 1  $P < 0.001$ ; and at site No. 2  $P < 0.01$ ).



The hourly rates of feeding of *P. cafer* as observed by us are somewhat comparable with those for a few other passerine birds such as American gold finch (2.0), American crow (3.0) humming bird (5.0) and scissor-tailed fly-catcher (6.7), while they are far insignificant when compared with those for house-wren (77.3) and 25.0 to 37.5 ... or 400 to 600 times a day for various other passerine birds (Wing, 1956).

During the course of feeding the parent birds arrive at the nests and depart from them by a particular path. While nearing the nests in a bush they land on a few branches, from the lower side, check the surrounding for safety and then only



reach the nests. The same path is retracted while leaving. As one parent is engaged in feeding the chicks, the other is sitting on a nearby tree and keeps a vigil against intruders. Quite a few times the parents arrive at the nesting site with empty beak. On such occasions they just hover around the bush but never go to the nest. Such visits might be to keep vigilance against predators. During the course of feeding no helper was noticed assisting the parent birds.

While arriving at the nest for feeding, the parent bird gives a loud and sharp call. Immediately this is responded to by the chicks by their feeble calls. Absence of any response from the chicks is an indication that they are fast asleep. The parent bird flies off the nest without disturbing them.

The feeding act by the parent is absolutely nonselective. The chicks show a competition for food. Yet we have never observed throughout our study any starvation deaths of chicks. Nestlings of passerine birds are reported to have ability to withstand starvation for one or two days (Shilov, 1973).

Throughout the nestling phase in both the cases studied, the parent birds never arrived at the nests in wet condition to provide water for the nestlings. Probably the succulent pulp of the fruits fed to the chicks could meet their water demand also. Bartholomew and Cade (1956) made similar observations in their studies on the American scarlet crossbeak which is also a passerine bird (vide Shilov, 1973).

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## A Report on Asian Waterfowl Census in Wetlands of Aligarh District during January 2001

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Fresh water streams, lakes and swamps all over northern India are flocked with migratory water birds during the winters. It was just the right time to count them in the last week of January and the first week of February to monitor their population. A combined effort in the entire sub-continent such as the Asian Waterfowl Census is very helpful in maintaining the record of the number of species and the species number of these winged visitors in every season. Notwithstanding anything else the long-term census data gives an excellent idea of population trends of these birds.

Mornings are cold and wintry and fog refuses to dissipate but highway activities take full swing and so does the avian life floating on the surface of the pond. One look at the stretch of water teeming with birds busy in the act of survival fills the wilderness with a sense of life. A gaggle of barheaded geese elegantly resting on a mound, a flock of common teal taking off to a nearby crop field and an occasional darter hurling from one end to the other invite even the mundane visitor to have a closer look.

A group of students from the Department of Wildlife Sciences, AMU conducted a survey of three wetlands in and around Aligarh District on three different days. The team members were Sangeeta Singh, Shweta Singh, Shweta Bhardwaj,

Usham Somerandro, Amit Sharma, Sharad Kumar, Mr. Jaseem Bakhsh and myself. Dr. Salim Javed supervised the work.

On 15 Jan 2001 we visited the Patna Bird Sanctuary which is a rain-fed fresh water lake. With a maximum depth of 2 m and spread in an area of 108 hectare. The Sanctuary is able to attract as many as 100,000 birds. However due to scanty rain and possible draining out of water for irrigation, this year there was very little water in the lake and owing to this there were just about three thousand birds. Locals traditionally protect the site since it is adjacent to a temple. It is a permanent lake that is half covered with free floating and submerged vegetation. On the banks there is growth of Ipomea spp.

On 25th January 2001, we visited Sheikh Jheel. It is a large wetland divided in two parts by the Upper Ganga Canal. The source of water to this wetland is the seepage of the canal water and rain. Because of this the lake is hardly ever short of water and it is almost a permanent water body. Its total area is 25 hectares and floating and submerged vegetation and reeds on the bank cover one third of the water stretch.

The third site covered was the Ashpan, which is the ash-dumping site of the nearby Kasimpur Thermal Power Station.



It is a man-made depression segregated from adjoining crop fields by ridges. The source of water is the industrial refuse that comes with the ash. Again this is also a perennial water body with a total expanse of one square kilometer. One fourth of this wetland is also covered with aquatic vegetation comprising *Eichornia crassipes*, *Hydrilla valisneria* and *Ipomea fistula*.

In Patna lake the portion with a little water was crammed to capacity by all the water birds. So we had a chance to walk on the dry and parched earth of the lake which is generally under water. On the contrary Sheikhha was flaunting ample water and the group had to wade through knee deep water to reach the mound in the middle so as to have a full view.

The Ashpan was rippling in full glory safely ensconced by ridges that sport thorny trees of *Prosopis juliflora* like guards against intruders. Nevertheless they could not differentiate between poachers and birdwatchers and a spiny bush that nearly escaped her eye hurt a group member. However the entire experience was packed with excitement, passion and a sense of responsibility. Altogether it was not Wordsworth's country revisited but no less.

The observations show that as it was a drought year in Patna there were more species of waders due to low water level and most of the birds crowded the Sheikhha lake. The highest diversity and number of waterfowls was recorded in Sheikhha but along with birds it also attracts poachers and illegal shooting of ducks is rampantly going on, much to the agony of the locals. However this is not the case with Ashpan due to its difficult accessibility. Nevertheless there was enough water in Ashpan supporting a large number of birds. It is desirable that water levels in these wetlands are regulated and shooting of birds is prevented. Considering the semi arid status of Aligarh region these water bodies are also very helpful in maintaining the water table of the area. This gives consistent water supply for agriculture.

The following table shows the bird counts of the different sites

NAME OF BIRD	PATNA	ASHPAN	SHEIKHA
<b>GREGES</b>			
LITTLE GREBE <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	0	25	13
<b>CORMORANTS &amp; DARTERS</b>			
LITTLE CORMORANT <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	0	75	60
ORIENTAL DARTER <i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	0	1	4
<b>HERONS &amp; EGRETS</b>			
INDIAN POND HERON <i>Ardeola grayii</i>	0	5	0

LITTLE EGRET <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	8	3
INTERMEDIATE EGRET <i>Egretta intermedia</i>	0	0	1
GREAT EGRET <i>Egretta alba</i>	0	3	2
PURPLE HERON <i>Ardea purpurea</i>	0	4	0
GREY HERON <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	0	2	0

#### IBISES & SPOONBILLS

WHITE SPOONBILL <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	80	0	0
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#### GEES & DUCKS

GREYLAG GOOSE <i>Anser anser</i>	625	60	500
BARHEADED GOOSE <i>Anser indicus</i>	80	0	31
RUDDY SHELDUCK <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	43	0	0
COMMON SHELDUCK <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	3	0	0
COMBDUCK <i>Sarkidornis melanotos</i>	0	0	25
EURASIAN WIGEON <i>Anas penelope</i>	4	2	200
GADWALL <i>Anas strepera</i>	10	100	0
COMMON TEAL <i>Anas crecca</i>	1175	400	125
MALLARD <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	5	0	0
SPOTBILLED DUCK <i>Anas poecilorhynchos</i>	62	0	50
NORTHERN PINTAIL <i>Anas acuta</i>	670	60	25
NORTHERN SHOVELLER <i>Anas clypeata</i>	800	0	150
COMMON POGIARD <i>Aythya ferina</i>	0	800	200

#### JAWKS & VULTURES

MARSH HARRIER <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	0	0
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#### CRANES

SARUS CRANE <i>Grus antigone</i>	1	0	2
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#### RAILS, GALLINULES & COOTS

WHITE BREASTED WATERHEN <i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>	0	15	10
MOORHEN <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	0	0	20
PURPLE SWAMPHEN <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	0	8	35
COMMON COOT <i>Fulica atra</i>	0	1000	200

#### FINFOOT & JACANAS

PHEASANT TAILED JACANA <i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>	0	2	3
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#### SHOREBIRDS & WADERS

BLACK WINGED STILT <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	15	21	17
AVOCET <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	13	0	0
NORTHERN LAPWING <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	9	0	0
REDWATTLED LAPWING <i>Vanellus indicus</i>	5	11	7
REDSHANK <i>Tringa totanus</i>	0	0	2
GREEN SANDPIPER <i>Tringa ochropus</i>	0	0	1
RUFF <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	0	0	1

#### GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS

INDIAN RIVER TERN <i>Sterna aurantia</i>	1	2	1
LITTLE TERN <i>Sterna albifrons</i>	1	1	2

#### KINGFISHERS

LESSER PIED KINGFISHER <i>Ceryle rudis</i>	0	1	1
WHITEBREASTED KINGFISHER <i>Halcyon smymensis</i>	0	1	2



Three Lakes of Mysore City, Karanji, Kukkarahalli and Lingambudhi have small islands where good numbers of trees are found. These groves afford roosting space for the migrants and residents. Come September, aggregation of different species gradually increases and reaches peak by the end of December. End of February indicates the days of roosting are finishing. Dispersal and arrival of these birds in

## Roosting Birds of Mysore City

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mornings and evenings *en masse* is marvellous to watch during peak days.

In Karanji Lake in less rainfall years, reduced water level exposes these islands and roosting doesn't take place. However, in Kukkarahalli Lake, water level doesn't recede because of continuous replenishment with sewage water.



Nevertheless, in Lingambudhi Lake roosting place shifts between east, northwest and north bank ensuring minimum levels of water even though island is bared. Probably the water shield to these islands provides safety thereby to birds's roosta.

Sodium vapour street light fixtures provided in Karanji and Kukkarahalli Lakes lits up dimly the portion of the roosting place as twilight. This has not disturbed the birds.

These birds can roost in any one of the lakes instead of spreading over to three lakes. Individually, these lakes have sufficient roosting space to accommodate all birds. Then why do all birds don't gaggle at a place ?

Roosting birds of city lakes are as follows :

Birds roosting	Karanji	Kukkarahalli	Lingambudhi
Little cormorant	2	23 *	31 *
Indian snag/Indian cormorant	--	07 *	19 *
Large cormorant/Great cormorant	--	21 *	123 *
Varier			24 *
Spot-billed pelican/grey pelican	52 *	08 *	08 *
Night heron/black crowned night heron	12	10 *	05
Pond heron	22	43	112
Cattle egret	--	1200	2000
Little egret	47	04 *	09
Grey heron	--	08 *	05 *
White ibis	21	120 *	23
Glossy i'b's	--	04	207
Rosy pastora/rosey starling	--	--	2500
Brahminy myna/brahminy starling	--	--	83
Greyheaded myna/ Chestnut tailed starling	--	--	500
Indian myns	--	1000	1500
Jungle myna	--	200	1000
House crow	17	139	129
Jungle crow	19	27	21
Common swallow	--	--	2200
*Indicates species breeding			

Roosting birds take different routes to forage every day. But the same species of the respective lakes choose almost the same route. Is it co-incident or well thought off ? These birds gabble enough before they disperse methodically. Mynas gabble first, followed by rosy starlings and then egrets, combined effect attains peak level before dispersal. By the time mynas start making noise early in the morning rosy starlings and egrets will be getting ready for day's flight by dressing their feathers. The moment they take off the noise immediately ceases. Utter silence followed by noise indicates birds are on their wings.

Rosy starlings after take off split into many groups, fly in different directions but some groups change their mind and deviate instantly in opposite direction. Some cattle egrets have a tendency to land back immediately after take off on the same roosting canopy whereas some mynas and starlings rest a while on a nearby tree and proceed after a brief halt. Swallows dispersal takes place on very dimly lit early mornings almost an hour before sunrise. Brahminy starlings are always active in and around roosting area only.

The trees in Mysore city's busiest place Sayyaji Rao road and K.R. Circle junction is the roost of innumerable roseringed parakeets, jungle and house crows.

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**B**irds are a delight to see and watch if, of course, one is conscious of the natural world around oneself. It is hard for one to digest how any human could not be touched by the ever-appealing nature. To be in the fooling of being a part of the environment that man has not yet 'manhandled' is great indeed. I would like to make use of the manhandled environment too to my advantage - watch the feathered component.

Recently I had a chance of being at a remote coastal area about 30 km. from Mayiladuthurai - 11.1° N 79.7° E and 7 km. north of Poraiyar 10.9° N 79.8° E - at Thirukkadaiyur. A very thinly populated area with a few scattered hamlets, generally desert-like, dry, there were standing green paddy and groundnut crops. A few kilometer's walk would take one to the beach.

It was the 16th day of January 2001. A smallish bird in comparison with the kites and eagles, a little bigger - stouter

and longer - than a big sized drongo, settled on a seven-foot tall support-pole about 200 feet from me. Was it a hawk? Two hawk-sized raptors had been thereabout for a couple of days defying my attempts at watching them. One had been identified as a shikra, anyway. The other was perhaps the present individual. The 7 x 35 binoculars couldn't resolve the figures to perfection. But what a delight! The raptor was considerate enough to stay put allowing me to progress closer, binoculars on the eyes.

Hawks and their ilk are a group of taunting kinds displaying feather-cloaks that vary rather perplexingly in the general colour patterns, squiggles, bars and streaks, beards and moustaches; the wings and the tail sport bold or subtle markings. Well, of which kind was this 'hawk' I was peering? The sun was bright overhead at the meridian and hence the plumage colour couldnt be made out easily, the binoculars

## Birdwatcher's Delight

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adjusting forward and backward in accordance with the cautious foot steps being taken. The wings closed in on the tail, hugging it clumsily being raised a little over it casting a shadow on it. The head was not grey but buff with streaks of black. There were downwardly curved light black stripes reminiscent of a bandit's moustache in miniature without the lateral screw; it was an 'Ornithobandit' alright. The bird discredited, from, inter alia, its size, as any of the aforesaid raptors, could be a falcon, a hobby or a kestrel. These three birds wear stripes on the undersurfaces breastdown, and the flanks. In the bird under observation the upper surface as well as the wings was closely barred in a rufous background. The primaries were dark and extended behind the secondaries. My luck was on my side; the raptor dipped its bill into the preen, lifting twistingly the rectrices spreading them in the process. It didn't preen, however. It seemed to have known my intent! It was a timely performance that revealed the characteristic terminal black spot on each tail quill. Also, it was noted that there were lighter spots at regular intervals along the length of each quill so that when the feathers were held together they presented themselves in parallel series of 'spotted bars' unlike the broad ones of the hawks. In the lack of the grey and the presence of the streaks on the rufous crown, the light narrow tail bars, the subterminal dark tail bar and the moustachial stripes the die was cast in favour of the female common kestrel - *Falco tinnunculus*.

While the shikra had been around the ground-nesting birds and the white-headed babbler were disturbed and agitated. From its perch-pole the common kestrel was not scanning

the sky for any flying or ground birds; it was watching the ground below, nevertheless. Did the spreading of the tail feathers have any part to play in the process of prey detection? Was it searching for a garden lizard that was few and far between there, or perhaps, even an arthropod, or a minor snake? Finding none good for its palate, the little marauder took off, displaying the transverse markings on the under surfaces of the wings and tail that appeared transparent.

The migrant race, *tinnunculus* is said to spread throughout the subcontinent overlapping the range of *oblongatus* in winter. The solitary behaviour, the plumage features and the flight pattern point to the race of the present bird being the latter. Its "Winter dispersal is not properly known". Native of the hills of Pakistan, Himalayas and Western Ghats from Khandesh to Kanyakumari, it is hard to know whence it had come down to Thirukkadaiyur. Could it have been from the Sri Lankan hills? Mystery abound. It should be a birdwatcher's delight to watch and be able to unravel the several aspects of the ecology of birds.

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## A Rare Instance of Spotted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) having Protracted Breeding Season During Winter and Making Nest Inside a Concrete House at Dharwad



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In his Book on Indian Birds (1979) Salim Ali has expressly mentioned that the nesting season for spotted munia, *Lonchura punctulata*, is chiefly July and October. This shows that the species prefers to breed normally during wet monsoon season and not during winter time. He has further said that its nest site is usually restricted to low thorny bush or tree. In certain areas the nest could be seen constructed in the creepers growing on either trellis-work or porchae or it may be a covered approach to entrance of concrete buildings.

Recently an extraordinary instance of a pair of spotted munia using interlaced cable wires as support to the nest outside a rude dweller room, in open market place at Dharwad was reported (NLBW, Vol. 40, No. 6, Nov-Dec., 2000, issue) by the senior author, Dr. J.C. Uttangi. This encounter by him was during the regular monsoon season in September, 2000. In the present article, an account is given of a strange behaviour of a pair of spotted munia not hesitating to use a rack, inside a store room of a concrete house, by taking advantage of the ventilating window as entry into the house to build a nest there

and successfully breed during a prolonged rainy weather during winter season at Dharwad.

On 19 November, 2000 morning which marks almost the end of monsoon period and beginning of the new winter season around Dharwad areas, the junior author, Sri S.M. Patil, suddenly heard a series of bird whistles and churrups outside his house "Jaya Pramod", located in Channa Basaveshwara (C.B.) Nagar, Dharwad - 7, about 2 kilometers away towards west of Mission Compound. Anxious to learn, what bird it could be, he came out to investigate and was surprised to find a pair of spotted munia perched on the compound wall of his own house. As he stood there watching one of the munias carrying an elongated grass blade in its beak quickly took off and flew towards the glass fixed ventilating window of the store room facing east of the bungalow. Sri Patil, a bank employee at Dharwad, being not only a trekker but, also a lover of Nature cum sport of "bird twitching", did not take much time to discover the intentioned ultimate aim of the two little birds. To his great surprise, he found that the munia pair had almost completed building their typical grass - woven globular nest on a half



open and half closed card board box kept on the rack, in a corner close to the window. There exist two vacant plots, on either side of Sri. Patil's house. Plenty of grass and other vegetation mixed with scrub was available. But, for the birds no suitable tree or creeper plant was available to put their nest there. The sky was overcast with clouds for a long duration across Dharwad changing the dry winter climate into warm and humid. Perhaps, it was this change in the weather that had induced the munla pair to take to breeding. How sudden climatic changes would influence breeding ecology of some local birds is difficult to explain. But, birds are experts in adjustments to prolonged seasons or sudden climatic changes taking place locally. In the same way, the cleverness in birds to adapt to human environment by taking advantage of every new opening is superbly developed.

Knowing fully well, that any kind of disturbance caused either to birds or to their nest would force the munias to abandon the place, Sri S.M. Patil had taken all necessary precautions towards safety of birds by warning all the members of the family and he had also seen to it that even a stray wandering cat nearby or a prowling one in the vicinity of the brood had been kept away. It follows that, naturally, in a situation like this, to take care of the nest unfailingly, especially during his absence, Sri Patil had put in charge reliable contingents including Mrs. Patil and their son Prashanth (Studying in 8th standard) to be in charge and to keep a watch on birds.

The eggs laid deep inside the brood chamber were invisible and could not be counted through the 2 inch wide and 6-7 inch deep entrance tube. The birds had used coarse grass outside the nest and inside it was all fine grass. From 22nd November 2000, onwards, the munias had stopped bringing grass to the nest. The egg-laying process started thereafter. That means they took at least 6-7 days time to complete the

nest. As it was risky, no attempts to count the eggs through a side opening were experimented. Spotted munias are known to lay a maximum of 8 eggs during the regular monsoon season. But, a minimum of 4 eggs would always be there. In the present instance of a protracted breeding season, it was confirmed at the end that the female had laid only 4 eggs because, only 3 fledglings that had emerged out were seen perched outside the nest on the 18th January 2001. The fourth one with full feathers on its body was found dead in the box. Perhaps it could not find the outlet of the ventilating window and in an attempt to fly it might have got hit to the edge of the fixed glass and died. That means all the 4 eggs laid had developed fully but one died out of injuries. There were no undeveloped eggs left behind in the nest. An examination of bits of faeces cast off in the box revealed undigested grains like jawar and paddy and a few of them which were really hard appeared to contain ingested egg shell. The total number of days the pair of munia birds at Dharwad took in reproducing their kind during the protracted breeding season between 19th November 2000 and 18th January 2001, would be approximately 60-62 days.

It may be said in conclusion, that because of their semi wild state and adaptive ability to protecting conditions of human environment, spotted munia, *Lonchura punctulata*, might like to enjoy a prolonged or protracted breeding season wherever niche and climatic conditions are favourable to them.

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## REVIEW

**A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF INDIA, SRI LANKA, PAKISTAN, NEPAL, BHUTAN, BANGALDESH AND THE MALDIVES** by KRYZ KAZMIERCZAK. 352 pages. 96 colour plates. Om Book Service, New Delhi. Price Rs. 795/-. Review by AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545 Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034.

The mandate of a 'field guide' is to facilitate users in identifying birds in the field quickly and easily. The fact that it has to be physically carried around by a user, often for hours at a time, demands that it be of a suitable size and weight. To attempt a field guide to the birds of the Indian region is a mammoth task requiring a comprehensive knowledge of the subject that can be acquired only by putting in many hours in the pursuit of the living bird.

Salim Ali's *Book of Indian Birds* (first published in 1941) was written at a time when the art of birdwatching was in such infancy in India that he had to devise a method of highlighting aspects of the bird - behavioural, physical, vocal, etc. — to enable users to identify the feathered creature before them. His book held the fort alone, for many years.

The birding scene changed for the better with the publication of Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp's *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (1998: Hardcover). Subsequently, the "Grimmskipp" brought out a *Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (1999: Soft cover) containing illustrations, distribution maps and short descriptive texts from their earlier, larger work.

Kazmierczak's field guide is similar to the *Pocket Guide* and caters to a market that is able to place birds at least within families.

The book under review is divided into 12 chapters including one of acknowledgements.

The Introduction has brief sections on the political regions covered and; the number of species illustrated (over 1,330, with a mention of those that could not be graphically depicted due to late or unpublished records by the time the book went to press).

A short section on "Taxonomy, systematic order and nomenclature," informs that the book broadly follows the taxonomy and scientific nomenclature of Inskipp, Lindsey & Duckworth's path-breaking 1996 publication. *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region*. However, minor subsequent changes have been incorporated in the present work.



The Systematic Order followed in the book is similar to Ali & Ripley's monumental *Handbook* and Ripley's (1982) *Synopsis*, rather than Sibley & Monroe's Order, followed by the *Annotated Checklist*. This is a relief for Indian birders who are used to the Systematic Order of the *Synopsis*.

Common English Names follow the *Annotated Checklist*, though alternate names are listed in the detailed "Index of English names," towards the end of the book. This however does not settle the upheaval that Indian birdwatchers find themselves in, due to recent changes in the vulgar English names of birds. The issue does not seem headed towards resolution for Bombay Natural History Society, India's premier ornithology body, may very well continue using the older (more popular in India) names in its forthcoming publications and scientific journal.

The chapter on "How to use this book," should be read a couple of times if you plan to use the book regularly. This is essential, for the book depends heavily on abbreviations and a telegraphic text - dictated by the need to fit maximum information within the restrictive dimensions of a field guide. Among other things you will realize that the red symbol of a flying bird depicts a species that is globally threatened or near-threatened (206 in all). Giving the serial numbers from the *Synopsis* against the relevant species has provided cross-referencing with an earlier standard work. Other symbols and/or abbreviations used in the text, like identification notes, altitudinal range, habitat and behaviour, voice and status, are explained here in detail. A sub-section gives explanatory notes on the species distribution maps used in the body of the text.

The chapter on "Family introductions" that follows gives brief insights into the characteristics, jizz, status and identification of each of the 96 Families illustrated in the plates. Beginners would do well to read this section and veterans to refresh their memory by dipping in occasionally. Useful hints in differentiating similar looking families (e.g. larks and pipits) can be picked up from this chapter e.g., larks have the "habit of crouching down when approached before taking flight if the intruder comes too near," (page 25).

The main section is followed by a useful glossary of ornithological terms and some native words used commonly on the subcontinent during birding e.g. "Deodhar, Duar, Ghat, Jheel, etc".

The section on "Useful organizations" lists international (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and national organizations involved with birdwatching and/or working for bird conservation in the region. Brief information is given about each organization.

A section on "References and further reading" contains an eclectic bibliography on the ornithology of the region, including family monographs and a list of sound guides.

The final set of 3 sections contains a comprehensive "Index of English names," containing both 'old' and 'new' names for easy use. An "Index of scientific names," indexed according to the binomial names i.e., *Corvus splendens* and not *splendens*, *Corvus*. The last section is a "Quick index to plate numbers." This last is a very useful tool for the field. To get to a Family you have to scan just 2 pages, indexed alphabetically by the commonest name for a species, e.g., "Coucal, Harrier, Heron," etc.

The main section of the book comprises "Colour plates and maps." I would like to dwell on this section in some detail. As a rule, illustrations and text face one another throughout the book. The related distribution maps are a page-flip away, either behind the pertinent text or the plate. There are some exceptions where all three, pictures, text and maps are on the same two-page spread. The layouts of Plate # 13, 14, 20 are bliss and future editions should view such a layout seriously for as many plates as possible even if it means a slightly thicker book. There are quite a few blank half-pages that could perhaps be put to good use. But one cannot wish for everything!

**PLATES:** The use of a pictorial index to the plates, on the double-page spread of the front inside covers, using a common species from each Family to guide the user to the relevant plate is a great idea and is being used for the first time in a book on Indian birds. It helps users to zero in on the plates of closely related species when a quick reference is required.

It is surprising that the artist for the covers and spine is John Cox and not Ber van Perlo. The cover of a book is a showcase for art that transcends the genre of field-guide illustration. In all fairness to van Perlo's work, the publishers should have allowed him to do the covers.

Birds are generally not identified by the spoor they leave, the food they eat or the homes they make. They are identified by illustrations of their likeness or photographs in field guides. Therefore "the illustrations are the most important part of any field guide," and are scrutinized critically by users. My comments however are of a general nature. I have not scrutinized each species in detail though I am sure inputs from users will help the author update future editions of the book for everybody's benefit.

My greatest grouse about the plates is the overlap of birds. In trying to fit all species of a Family on a single plate, or as few plates as possible, the artist has in many instances, crowded the birds onto one page. In so doing he has painted birds overlapping each other as a result of which their colours inadvertently merge or are barely separable. This requires some getting used to, especially when a quick 'ID' is required. This could however very well be a limitation of my personal perspective! Some examples are: Pl 20#1, 2, 4; Pl 23#3; Pl 29#10 (dash between flying and standing birds); Pl 45#1, 2; Pl 50#6, 15; Pl 60 #2, 11, 14; Pl 64 #10, 13; Pl 81 most of the redstarts; Pl 89 #4 (# 5 is fine as the outline of the birds is quite distinct, unlike #4 where the faces of many are painted against a background of another bird's body); Pl., 94 # 9; 95 # 14, 15, 16.

Besides the plumage, I feel the head and its markings are a major identification feature of a bird. It is that portion of its body that is viewed by a birdwatcher first if one is given the chance by the bird! It therefore helps to have a clear profile of the head of the bird and not merge it into the body of another when illustrating a field guide.

Using a white background is fine as it contrasts well with the colours of the bird, but becomes problematic when parts of the bird are also white. The result of this is that the background and the plumage merge as is visible on plates 6 #2, 3, 4 (in flight); 10#11; 11#4 (in flight). Also in reality one seldom sees birds against a white background. The landscape they inhabit



is multicoloured, thank goodness! The exception, of course, is birds in snow.

The illustrations, when compared with the Grimskipp's book, have a spontaneity that makes them seem like deft field paintings by a remarkably adept and accomplished craftsman, plying his art for the specific job of bird identification. The more I use this guide, the more I am astonished at how well this style works. It complements admirably the amount of detail my eye can absorb in the quick back-and-forth between binocs and bird guide that often takes place in a field-oriented crunch situation. This is the intrinsic strength of the pictures. Often the utility of intricate details is useful only during leisurely field conditions or desk-bound reference work.

**MAPS & TEXT:** The two great strengths of this field guide are the species distribution maps ("compiled from information available up to mid-1999") and the telegraphic texts accompanying the plates. The inside back cover has a double-page "Key to distribution maps," that is simple to digest and makes the maps easy to follow and decipher. The colour coding is clear and distinctive. The light brownish colour that

appears in maps on page 33 (Pl. 1, # 4, 5 & 6); p. 40 (Pl. 3 #6) and p. 125 (Pl. 30 #4) is actually a wash of red dots suffering from the vagaries of the printed world! Maps are located easily and quickly as they are subtitled by the English name of the species they represent.

The author has given great importance to birdcalls in the text, and rightly so. This most definitely pegs the book a notch higher in the field guide market for the region. I had a rather graphic example of the utility of this feature recently when I used the book to positively identify a Besra (*Accipiter virgatus*) by its call, as opposed to a Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) in Kodakanal.

The Indian region is large enough to accommodate many books on birds, the recent spate of field guides notwithstanding! I think that this is just the prelude to books on regional and biogeographical avifaunas for our region.

In the final analysis the utility of a field-guide is its facility and usefulness in the field. I've used this one extensively for more than a month and have found it a quick and reliable companion. I cannot recommend it enough.



## CORRESPONDENCE

**NOTES ON LONGEARED OWL, HUME'S SHORT TOED LARK AND ON PURPLE AND GREEN COCHOAS IN MIZORAM.** HARKIRAT SINGH SANGHA, B-27, Gautam Marg, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302 021.

On March 8, 1999, I was leading a group of birdwatchers from Sweden at Harike Bird Sanctuary, Punjab. While walking through a young plantation of shisham *Dalbergia sissoo* along the Sutlej river we saw one long-eared owl *Asio otus*. Most of the members of our group were familiar with this Palearctic species, therefore, identification was instant. I checked the main features of the bird carefully. They were all there, long ear tufts when alarmed, orange eyes and streaking upto belly.

While we were watching the owl some members of the group spotted three more long-eared owls roosting on another tree in the vicinity of first one. It was very easy to spot these migratory owls as the shisham trees were almost leaf-less. Their colonial roost on almost denuded shisham trees was extraordinarily exposed. The first leaves of the spring had just started sprouting on some of the trees and these failed to hide the owls.

The long-eared owl is essentially a palearctic owl and it has been recorded throughout Punjab and Sind as a sparse and uncommon winter visitor (Roberts 1991). Ali and Ripley (1981) describe it variously as "a vagrant, rare and as locally not uncommon". "It is mainly a winter visitor to the parts of NW India (Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab)" (Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp 1998). They assign rare status to this owl in India.

Considering the foregoing facts, sighting of long-eared owl at Harike is not surprising. Harike is well within the range of the species and the following records seem to suggest it is quite regular at Harike. Upto 17 were recorded on March 23, 1997

(Robson 1997) and four on February 7, 1998 (Robson 1998) by Per Undeland. Ben King saw six birds at the same site on February 2, 1999 (Ben King verbally).

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### Late Breeding of Hume's Short-toed Lark in Ladakh

On August 28, 2000, we left ITBF camp at Hanle for Chumar around 9.00 in the morning. Around 9.45 while we were driving past Pongo village (4240 m.) one Hume's short-toed lark (*Calandrella acutirostris*) with an insect in its bill flew across the track. We immediately braked our jeep to look at the bird. The bird settled on the ground about 15 metres from the track and quickly worked its way into the grassy area before disappearing. After a while it flew away but soon returned with some feeding material in its bill. I surmised that the bird was feeding the chicks and quite easily discovered the nest near a flowing stream containing three hungry beaks!

The ground cover at the site was about 25 per cent - mostly grass tufts. The nest was at the foot of 25 cm. high grass tuft. The nest was built of grass and stems, lined with white animal hair. A strand of white cord was on the rim, clearly originating from the nearby habitation. It was also parapeted round the rim with small pebbles and gravel. The diameter of the nest was 63 cm. compared to 60 cm. given by Ali and Ripley (1986) and depth about 40 cm.



The nest held three newly hatched chicks judged to be only two - three days old. They were very small almost naked except for some sparse pale cream white down.

After noting the details of the chicks and the nest I observed the feeding birds from a safe distance. They never approached the nest directly but would cautiously work their way towards it. The parents brought small caterpillars to feed the chicks. Once the dropping was also removed from the nest and dropped some distance away.

According to Ali and Ripley (1986) the breeding period of the species in Ladakh is from May to July and from May to August according to Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp (1998). The present observation indicates that in Ladakh breeding period possibly extends up to at least early September for the species.

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#### Purple and Green Cochoas in Mizoram

On March 27, 1998 Krys Kazmierczak and I were watching birds near the Phawngpui (Blue Mountain) in the Phawngpui National Park, Mizoram. On noticing movement in a tree along the track we stopped to inspect. The canopy of the tree was quite dense and we could not see the birds. But on flushing three birds flew out - one purple cochoa *Cochoa purpurea* and two grey-winged blackbirds *Turdus boulboul*.

Fortunately, the purple cochoa flew into a small tree which was not very dense. After 10-15 minutes it flew away but by then we had enjoyed excellent views of the male bird and had recorded its call notes. Its call can be best written as soft high "pink-pink-pink" and soft dry rattling "mmmk" given alternately at irregular intervals of 1-5 seconds. The call was interspersed with an occasional nasal "nyer" or whistled "peeee".

On March 28, 1998 we heard a purple cochoa calling near the Forest Rest House of the park but could not locate the bird. However, on March 28, 1998 we were lucky to see another male bird. Possibly it was the same bird we had heard on March 28, 1998.

On March 29, 1998 while walking back to Sangau village from the park our attention was drawn by a high pitched monotone whistle. During our long search for the source of the call we heard it numerous times. In fact KK recorded the call and played it back to lure the shy bird from hiding.

At last, when we had almost given up, the bird was seen sitting on an exposed branch of the tree. It was a green cochoa

*Cochoa viridis* calling : I observed it for 20 seconds or so. It flew away and was lost again although it continued calling. It was a long drawn out, high pitched monotone whistle, best written "seeeeeeeeeee" lasting more than one second. The call was being repeated at intervals of three seconds or so.

According to Ali and Ripley (1998) purple cochoa's status is rare and little known in the subcontinent. It is distributed in the Himalayas from Kumaon (Almora, Naini Tal) east through Nepal, Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan, Meghalaya in the Khasi Hills and Manipur. Ali and Ripley (1998) assumed it occurred in Arunachal Pradesh. However, it has been reliably recorded from there. (P. Singh 1995) Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp show purple cochoa for Himachal Pradesh also (1998). There is only one confirmed record from Bangladesh. (Thompson *et al.* 1993). This most unlikely of records was presumably a vagrant from nearby hill states of India. In Myanmar it is a rare bird (Smythies - 1986). In the available literature there is only one record from Mizoram (Ghose 1999).

The green cochoa has been described as rare resident in Kumaon (Naini Tal), Nepal (not recorded since Hodgson) Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan and the hills of North-East by Ali and Ripley (1998). In the neighbouring Myanmar it is described as "another very rare species" by Smythies (1986). Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp's (1998) map of green cochoa distribution shows a record from Mizoram probably one of Koelz's (?) Its optimum zone in Manipur is 1000-1500 m (Ali and Ripley 1998). In the Phawngpui National Park it was recorded by us at 1790 m.

#### Acknowledgement:

I thank Krys Kazmierczak for reading an earlier draft of this note and offering useful comments.

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Cover : Indian Great Horned Owl (*Bubo bubo*) with young at nest at Rishi Valley. This huge brown owl, with prominent ear tufts and orange eyes, frequents dense forests, mountain cliffs, ravines and steep rocky terrains. It hunts and controls rodent population. Thus the bird is of great significance to agricultural economy.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS



# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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**Two months in Kihim**

While Kihim always provides a lovely holiday, the pile of unattended letters on our return is a daunting sight. Will try and deal with them in good time - now that my hand is in action again, that can no longer be an excuse for dereliction of duty. One of the birds which were so numerous around Kihim 50 years ago were nightjars. Every time we drove there at night their gleaming red eyes were lighted by the headlights of the car. Now there are none. But I am glad that they survive in Tamil Nadu (see article in correspondence section by Zal Whitaker).

I have often referred to the coucals (crow pheasants) of Kihim and the regular pattern of the calls of males and females. The 5 note call of the male is so often answered by the 4 note call of the female, at a slightly lower pitch (as becomes a female's status in our society). But this time, strangely, I noticed two changes: the coucals rose as early as 5.15 a.m., and secondly, they called almost "interminably" at times - something which I have never noticed earlier.

A trio of grey hornbills (2 adults and 1 young) were around a great deal. The banyans, peepals and jamuns were teeming with berries and frugivorous birds had a good season. Saw one active nest of a coppersmith, of which there were many around.

One memorable sight this time was to see the fury of a crow against its dead companion. My grandson with his high class telescopic air gun managed to bring down one, and hung the dead body at a suitable place as a possible meal for civet cats which he was studying. Before the cat arrived a group of jungle crows managed to retrieve the dead body of their companion and celebrated the occasion by a general conference on top of a casuarina tree. Thereafter, one member of the assembly set about tearing the victim to pieces. As an act of demented fury I have never witnessed anything like it. Perhaps it was a warning to all the jungle crows around against falling a prey to Homo sapiens.

**Salim Ali or J.C. Daniel**

Ever since the Twelfth Revised & Enlarged Centenary edition of the Book of Indian Birds was published in 1996, I have been wondering whether the B.N.H.S. and Daniel did the right thing by producing this hybrid by two authors. Even if it involved only a minor addition to the original, the new version in the name of the original author would have been wrong in principle. In fact the original book contained 296 species, the later edition contains 536; 242 additional species. The original book consists of 18 Orders. The new one contains 16 Orders, as per the new "fashion" (to use Salim Ali's appropriate word). In the new classification Falconiformes has been eliminated and



hawks, kites, vultures, falcons and eagles are now placed under Ciconiiformes (which formerly consisted of herons, ibises, spoonbills, flamingos and such like). The new arrangement appears rather odd to the layman. The old Order Podicipediformes has been dropped and the little grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis* - now converted to *Tachybaptus ruficollis* is placed in the Order Ciconiiformes).

It is customary in the world of literature to retain the writings of great masters in their original form, mistakes and spelling idiosyncracies included. The eleven editions of the BOIB by SA is a classic collection by any standard and should be left unchanged for posterity.

J.C. Daniel's revised and enlarged vision should have been a new volume (and could be again), and in this he could explain the rationale of the new classification, and of the many recent scientific advances as a result of the emphasis on DNA and genetic influences in the evaluation of species.

#### Threatened Birds of the World

We have spoken about this book quite often in the past and now at last we have a review by Aamir Ali in this Newsletter. In his covering letter of 20-3-2001, Aamir suggested that we "publish the list of 123 threatened and near threatened birds in India". This I have been able to do through the kindness of Aasheesh Pittie and BNHS. Now it is up to us to work towards eliminating the threats to these birds in whatever way we can.

#### A Bibliographic Index to the Ornithology of the Indian Sub-Continent

Aasheesh Pittie never rests on his oars, and apart from the monthly *Pitties* which are a joy to read, he has now produced a CD ROM on Ornithology which is likely to be of immense help to those seeking to enhance their scientific knowledge about birds. I took over the disc to a computer friend and asked him to produce information about one of my favorites, the ashy wren warbler. Nothing happened. Then we realised that the disc dealt only in scientific names. By pressing a few buttons a long list of references appeared on the screen. I am sure the seekers of knowledge will find this 20 year effort of great value. See Aasheesh Pittie's announcement in this issue..

#### Home Study Course in Ornithology

I see from a recent report that this course in the Rishi Valley Education Centre (517 352, Chittoor Dist., A.P.) has enrolled 453 persons already, and from the letters of appreciation received from the participants it is likely to keep "prospering". S. Rangaswami, the founder and fulcrum of this Course, received a well deserved tribute from the Director of the Rishi Valley School : Dr. Radhika Herzberger.

"In April 1997 Mr. Rangaswami established a Department of Bird Studies as part of Rishi Valley School. In order to create a permanent presence for the department, he upgraded it to

its present status, an Institute of Bird Studies and Natural History. The Institute, which lists the eminent ornithologist Dr. Santharam on its faculty, draws visiting naturalists from different parts of the country to the valley and engages in conservation activities. Mr. Rangaswami extended the range of the Institute's activities still further by creating an ambitious Home Study Course on ornithology. He single-handedly wrote out all 24 out of the 26 chapters of this Course in two months, in a period of feverish creativity. When the designing of this course and production of the study material presented additional problems, he switched roles and became an assiduous fund raiser. The funds he collected now support a scholarship scheme for prospective students, which include housewives, senior citizens, school going children, as well as underprivileged members of society from almost every state in India. Mr. Rangaswami plans to conduct training courses in ecological restoration, bird identification in the field and bird census surveys in the summer, when students are out of school and college. 'He is a role model to all of us', wrote Professor M.S. Swaminathan of Mr. Rangaswami's work.]

Mr. Rangaswami's presence at Rishi Valley School, has enriched the lives of the students and teachers. He has made us aware of a source of beauty that we might otherwise not have seen or heard. He has taught us to care for the natural world. His achievements stem from his dedication of wisdom, to beauty and to the well-being of all living things. The comment of another great naturalist, Roger Tory Peterson, may help to explain the passion of Rangaswami's life: "If we are to save the birds, we have to make as many people as possible aware of the threats to their survival ... We must save the birds, and in saving them, we will save the earth."

#### Humayun Abdulali

I met Humayun in Kihim on the 25th of May just a few days before he died. He was sitting in the garden on his usual arm chair, with binoculars focussed on a casuarina tree where the common grey hornbill (the ones with a casque) nested. The Origin of the Species by Charles Darwin was on his lap, with several other classics on the ground around him. It was sad that his last years were spent in physical distress, though luckily his mind remained as sharp as ever.

#### William Selover 500 Dollars Grant for Nature Conservation

The grant has been awarded to Dr. Satish Panda and his colleagues for protecting the swifts on the Vengurla Rocks. What they intend to do, is described in the article in this issue. The money is being sent to the Ecological Society, Pune, whose President Prakash Gole will oversee the operations and ensure effective action.







## Swift Action that Saved the Swifts

DR. SATISH A. PANDE, VISHWAS KATDARE and RAM MONE  
C-9, Bhosale Park, Sahakamagar-2, Pune 411009

To document the current status of the various nesting terns and of the edible-nest swiftlets of the Burnt Island, Vengurla Rocks, so as to publish the verified facts in our coming publication, *The Birds of Kokan and the Western Ghats*, we set foot on the Burnt Island on April 8, 2001 at 9 A.M. We found the barren island covered here and there with some dry grass. A few dead decaying terns with black wings, some with yellow beaks and many broken egg-shells with blue blotching were scattered on the island. Innumerable swifts were sallying over the island. Suddenly the swifts started disappearing in the very ground in front of us. Careful inspection revealed that this was a skylight to the large cave which was sprawling beneath us into which the swifts were plunging at great speed. Burnt Island was easily 75-130 feet above the sea level and the edges of the island were a sheer vertical drop to the sea. The entrance to the cave was at sea level and to reach it meant a vertical climb, down a 50 feet cliff-face. What we saw after peeping through this skylight was mind boggling. The cave was filled with a bamboo framework which reached the roof of the cave. We sensed that something was wrong. The bamboo was not supposed to be here. To investigate further Vishwas negotiated the cliff and entered the cave.

He called from inside the cave and we could see and hear him through the skylight which was 70 feet above. We lowered the still and video cameras, measuring tapes, notebook, flashlight and pen with the help of a rope through this skylight. A yell from below told us that the walls of the cave were plastered with bird nests and that the birds were continually colliding against Vishwas. All this time we could see from above that the swifts were freely entering and leaving the cave via the skylights which were actually two in numbers. By this time the afternoon sun was blazing in full fury. We had sent back the launch and had asked them to collect us again at 6.30 p.m. The village of Niwati-Medha from where we had started was 7 nautical miles away. We were on the Burnt Island in the Arabian sea (N16°35'-45', W 73°27'-30'), the three of us, with no possibility of shade. Shelter there was. We found a bamboo framework, probably erected by the same people who had built the frames in the cave. Ram tried to climb down the cliff but since the going was difficult, on my behest he abandoned the plan. I (SAP) opted to swim around the island to the entrance of the cave after negotiating three rocks which were covered with goose barnacles, and sea-urchins, thereby liberally bruising my feet and hands.

In the cave there was not a single place free of the bamboo framework, for such was the massive structure. It meant that the activity was several years old. There were new bamboos and old ones tied with strong strings. All were coated with 2 inches thick layer of birdshit. It was obvious that this was erected to poach the birdnests which were on the walls of the

cave and on the roof. With the aid of torchlight we could make a conservative estimate of about 3000 nests. The nests were pearly white halfcups stuck sidewise and were sticky and a bit spongy. The free edges were re-enforced with straw, obtained from the island. None of the nests had eggs. But since most nests were nearly complete the eggs would have been laid in a day or two. Many nests were infested with bugs and tiny maggots. Guano-eating cockroaches were abundant. We also saw a variable number of brown rock pigeons and small bats in the cave close to the roof. All this while the swifts were colliding against us and two swifts which clung to the nest were identified as *Collocalia unicolor*. All the nests were attended by the birds.

By evening the swifts which were busy making the nests in the dark recesses of the cave started leaving the cave in large numbers and flew over the island, a few departing to the coast. At dusk we saw them returning to the cave through the skylight in their hundreds. The cave was about 300 mt. long 4.5 mt. wide and 15 mt. high. In the dark cave the swifts were navigating at tremendous speed with sonar echolocation. One should also consider the blinding effect that they would experience after coming to the dark cave from the bright outer skies.

The dimensions of two nests were 1) 66 mm x 70 mm x 23 mm depth (2) 45 mm x 50 mm x 23 mm depth. The nest density at various places was 22/sq. mt. 38/sq. mt and 4/sq. mt. This gave an estimate of about 3000 nests. Having completed our documentation and taking various readings we reached Niwati at 7.45 pm in the motor driven ferry which came to take us back. Before taking our dinner we gathered a large crowd from the fishing hamlet and on a colour TV screen showed them the video tape taken by Vishwas while in the cave. We asked them as to who had erected the bamboo frames and why. We learnt that they were built over a period of years by some persons who come twice a year for collecting pigeon droppings for some medicinal purposes. Why we asked them was a tall bamboo frame required to collect the droppings from the floor. Then they realized that something was definitely wrong. A truckload of bamboo-frames and another truckload of rotting bamboos were seen on the floor and this was being played on the screen in front of their very eyes. We told them about the swifts and about their saliva-nests and about the demand for them in the Far East countries, that the trade was banned in India and the birdnests were protected by the Indian Wildlife Act. *We spent one hour with them which was to pay us dividends later.*

The following day after our return to Pune and Chiplun respectively we got the addresses of the CCF, The Regional Deputy Director, WR, The CF Kothapur circle. We dropped letters to all the authorities. But I (Satish Pande-henceforth the narration is by this author) was getting anxious since the



next three days were public holidays and no action could be taken. This was frustrating for the doctor inside me. I have no concept of a holiday. *When life is at stake there is no time to be lost. And here 3000 nests were at stake.* My God this was unthinkable. Something had to be done. I obtained the phone numbers of CF Kolhapur and from him of the DCF Sawantwadi under whose jurisdiction the Rocks come. I informed them on phone about our suspicions of clandestine trade in the birdnests. This was news to them! On the request of the DCF I sent a detailed e-mail to him. Then I e-mailed all my birdwatcher friends with a request to forward the mail to their friends since this was a grave matter. The BNHS, "I am a member", Sanctuary magazine, Newsletter for Birdwatchers were also contacted and informed. I got an answer from many friends one of whom was Mr. Ulhas Rane who kindly forwarded the message to the e-mail group of all India birdwatchers-Pakshimitra. Then as per the suggestion of Mr. Prakash Gole I also apprised Vice Adm. (Retd) M. P. Awati so as to involve the Coast Guards if the need should arise.

We had reliably learnt that the poachers usually came to the island in the last two weeks of April. It was any time now. The thing was getting very urgent. The forest squad had not yet gone to the island and this was discouraging. In order to create a public awareness on this issue a press release was made in the Marathi newspaper *Sakal*. On 16 April, Monday the news was carried on the first page with photographs. It was an appeal to all the bird and nature lovers to request the CCF to take immediate action. The bamboo structure had to be immediately removed before the arrival of the poachers. On the same evening I got a phone call from south Kokan from a fisherman. He had read the news in the paper. He told me that a dozen people had landed on the Rocks in the noon and that they had unloaded a fresh supply of bamboo. This was the most crucial and timely information. This fisherman was one of the many who had attended our video lecture that evening. Our one hour of conservation awareness drive had paid off!

I immediately rushed to the STD booth and phoned the Sawantwadi DCF Mr. Gupta. He said that he was dispatching two Guards the next day to verify the status of the Island cave. I told him about the recent development. He was not aware of this development. I felt concerned about the nests but also about the safety of the Forest Guards. The poachers could be armed. If alarmed they would run away and would never be caught. I requested the DCF if he could send a bigger, armed force of the Guards? At 9 pm the DCF was in the office. He

promised to take a serious view of the facts and believed me and thanked me for the timely information.

Because the drama was enacted in the sea on an island, I thought of informing Vice Admiral Awati also. I was getting panicky. The Vice Adm. gave me a couple of phone numbers of the Coast Guard officers. Contact could not be made that late. All this while I thought of the poachers taking away one nest after another. After a sleepless night I got a call from the Vice Adm. that the Coast Guards had promised to send a chopper and if necessary a ship to the Island. I also got a call from their office asking for an official Fax complaint which I lodged. Help was assured. After a long time all seemed well. A phone to the CF Kolhapur confirmed that a large party of RFO's was on its way to the rocks at 6 am.

That night I received information that 5 poachers and a local person were arrested red-handed with 6 bags full of birdnests, by the Forest Department in a swift action. The RFO's were in uniform and there was no resistance offered. Now the matter is in the court. Another battle will now begin.

The dutiful officers of the Forest Department of Sawantwadi, many bird lovers who encouraged us on the e-mail, the nature conservation conscious people of the village of Niwati-Medha who informed us about the arrival of the poachers, all deserve credit for the safety of the swifts in this unique conservation action on the remote and forgotten Bumt Island cave where the Indian edible-nest swiftlets still roost and nest in their thousands. Long term conservation plans should now be undertaken.

#### Comments:

But the work is half done. The bamboo framework is yet to be removed and the cave entrance is to be sealed with an iron grid. The forest people and Coast Guards will have to make regular patrols to this site also. The SW Monsoon roughs up the sea by mid May. The Island would soon become inaccessible. The next harvest of the nests would be due in September. We should take one more swift action. The legal status of the swift family which does not feature in any of the schedules needs to be strengthened. The Vengurla Rocks should be declared a special Protection Area. Fresh studies of the marine terns nesting here need to be undertaken. Swift ringing can be carried out. Nature awareness programmes need to be undertaken at the various fishing hamlets. The youth here is definitely responsive but unaware and ignorant. We solicit the aid of the Forest Department and of the BNHS in these activities.



## The Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* in Dudwa

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One of the drawbacks of working on the endangered species is that one gets very frustrated by seeing continued decline of the species due to habitat destruction, mismanagement, lack of firm commitment by the government

to protect the species, and over-all public apathy to wildlife conservation. One species that gives me some hope is the Bengal florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*. Habitat protection is the major step for saving species and in the case of Bengal



floricorn of Dudwa National Park, it is clearly proved that if we protect sufficient habitat, species can survive even if the number is small.

The Bengal floricorn is one of the most endangered bird species of India, and perhaps the most endangered member of the Bustard family in the world. I now have more than 15 years association with this bird. In a major study conducted between 1985 and 1990 through the funds provided by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, we had estimated that less than 400 Bengal Floricorns survive in India. Dudwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh was one of the strongholds. My colleague, Ravi Sankaran did his Ph.D. on the floricorns and Dudwa was one of his study areas. We spent long hours watching this enigmatic bird, sitting on a 30 m machan or an elevated spot.

Before our intensive studies starting in 1985, Carol and Tim Inskipp, famous British birdwatchers and now known to most Indian birdwatchers through their indispensable book (with Richard Grimmett) saw two male floricorns in Dudwa during their short visit in 1984. Our studies from 1985 to 1989 revealed that nearly 40 floricorns are found in Dudwa National Park. I also saw many good grasslands in Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary in Lakhimpur-Kheri district, Lagga-Bagga in North Pilibhet district, Katemlaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in Bahraich district and Sohagi-Barwa in Gorakhpur (now Maharajganj district) (all districts are in Uttar Pradesh). I was pleasantly surprised when I was able to locate Bengal floricorns in Kishanpur in 1991-92. This gave me hope that perhaps this endangered bird still survives in other potential grasslands of the *terrai* of Uttar Pradesh. In Lagga-Bagga, a small grassland enclave of about 11 sq. km, I am sure the Bengal floricorn is found because it abuts the grasslands of Sukla Phanta Wildlife Sanctuary of Nepal from where there are persistent reports of Bengal floricorns. Birds know nopolitical boundaries especially between two friendly countries with open borders!

The Bengal floricorn show high plumage dimorphism in male and female. The adult male is a handsome bird about 55 cm high, with jet black head, neck, breast and underparts. The back is buff-brown, heavily mottled and vermiculated with black arrow-head marks. The breeding males have elongated feathers on the head, neck and breast, giving the appearance of moppy head, thick neck and hanging breast. The wings of breeding males are spotless white except the black outer webs of the first and second primaries. When closed the wing shows up as a long broad white patch on the side. During flight the white wings become conspicuous. Like all bustards, it has a very interesting courtship display to attract females, which is cryptically coloured and extremely difficult to see. This aerial display usually takes place in an open patch of a grassland where the territorial male spends most of its evenings and mornings. First it stands with head, neck and breast feathers fluffed up. It may stand in this posture for many minutes, sometimes up to 20-30 minutes and then it jumps diagonally forwards at an angle of about 45 degrees, producing a flapping sound (*dhab, dhab dhab*). On reaching the peak of ascent the sound stops and wings are opened displaying glistening white wing feathers against jet black body. It then starts a

sharp whistle-like 'chip-chip-chip' call. The neck is inflated and hangs like an elongated black balloon. It then glides down for some distance with open wings and just about a metre from the ground. It begins to flap again and moves forward gaining the lost height. On reaching the apogee of the second flight curve, it stops flapping wings and floats down more or less vertically with partly open wings, drooping pouch, dangling and even paddling legs. It usually covers between 20 to 40 m of ground in this aerial display and takes about 7 seconds from take off to landing. It calls 4-7 times while in the air. This display is usually seen for 2-3 hours in the morning and the same duration in the evening. However, on cloudy weather, it may display even during noon hours. The best way to see this spectacular display is to inconspicuously wait near a grassland and allow the bird to show itself.

Coming back to Dudwa, perhaps 10-15% of the Indo-Nepal population of Bengal floricorns survives in this famous Park. In 1988-89, we saw 14 territorial males and five other males. Assuming that the sex ratio is 1:1, we estimated that at least 40 adult Bengal floricorns are found in Dudwa. In May 1996, I did a very thorough survey of Dudwa and Kishanpur to see how this species is faring. Nothing can delight conservationists more than to see some increase in the number of an endangered species. Six days of hectic search revealed 25 male floricorns. All the grasslands where we had seen adult territorial male floricorns between 1985 to 1989 had floricorns in 1996 also. I suspected some increase in their numbers, which perhaps could also be due to better search efforts. In 1996, my estimate was that between 48 and 56 adult floricorns are found in Dudwa National Park, and perhaps 10 to 20 in Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary. Dudwa and Kishanpur now constitute Dudwa Tiger Reserve (DTR) so this Reserve had 50 to 76 adult Bengal floricorns in 1996.

Between 9 to 15 May, 2001, I conducted another thorough survey in Dudwa and Kishanpur with the help of Manav Khanduja and Utpal Das of Centre for Environmental Law (WWF) and Amar Deshpandey of BNHS. We searched all the known territories of the Bengal floricorn and some new areas also. We could locate 23 territorial males, and two females. In only two territories in Dudwa, we could not locate any male floricorn. Unfortunately, we had very little time in Kishanpur but even then we were able to see one displaying male. Harish Guleria of the Wildlife Institute of India, working on the grasslands of the *terrai* for his Ph.D. has seen 33 males. Even if we assume that some males were counted double (although unlikely in this highly territorial bird), we can easily say that between 25 to 30 males are found in Dudwa and Kishanpur.

Fortunately, the Bengal floricorn is doing well in Dudwa, thanks to the proper maintenance of grasslands by the Forest Department. The best time to see the Bengal floricorn is from March onwards once the grasslands are burnt, till mid June, when the park closes. Most of the tourists go to Dudwa to see tiger and many return disappointed, but if they look beyond the tiger, they may be able to see one of the most endangered and enigmatic bustards of the world.







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## The Year of the Rosy Pastor

THEJASWI. S

An early November day at Lingambudhi lake. 5.45 a.m. The chattering of mynas and other roosting birds had begun three-quarters of an hour earlier. The clamour begins to rise in content and volume, faintly audible to early morning 'walkers' along the double road a kilometer away, then reaches a feverish, claustrophobic pitch about half an hour later. Slowly, the dark outlines of waterlogged Acacia trees emerge, highlighted at the tops as we face the pale pink eastern sky. White forms hitherto coalesced together are now marked out individually - the egrets - cattle mostly, with little and median sprinkled over here and there. Dark forms of cormorants and glossy ibis too appear but are not clearly visible as they are further off. All this as the frenzied racket of the starling fraternity shows no sign of abating.....All of a sudden, there is the momentary lowering of the chorus and then, the rosy pastors. Enormous flocks of rosy pastors begin to issue out of the trees, emanating like wisps of smoke out of a chimney on a windy day. The flocks seem to come out from here and from everywhere - the edge of the tree grove, the middle, the other end; confusion reigns supreme. At last, one of the many flocks begin to head north, another couple, south and the largest of them all, around *half a mile in width* turns east. All in all, the excess of 5000 birds! The flock heading south turned back, settled on some embattled Dalbergia trees and flew away again, now splitting into a small group for the south and the rest for the north. In the meanwhile, a couple of thousand common and jungle mynas, around five hundred grey headed mynas and a surprising two thousand blackheaded mynas seemingly vanished in a short spell of a couple of minutes, considering the ten minutes taken by the pastors. Each species of myna is distinctive in flight, recognizable even in the feeble light of early mornings. Individual flight characteristics like size, underlying patterns and frequency of wing-beats come into play, so also the group formations. The rosy pastors, for example, have sleek bodies, a dark head set against a lighter body, dark narrow wings with no pattern and a quicker flight with respect to the common and jungle mynas. They are easily separable from the greyheaded and blackheaded species by size. They fly in close-knit formations, sometimes twisting and turning like stints during the initial moments of departure from the roost. Even the group flight calls are distinctive enough to merit a role in diagnosis, especially when chaotic scenes like this one are witnessed.

Egrets begin to leave at around six thirty. In earlier seasons, they would depart en masse, giving the appearance of a 'Ksheera sagara', a sea of milk. This year however, they would leave individually or in groups of two to thirty, taking their time to take off. The figure in number had also reduced from a peak of four and a half thousand last year, five thousand for three seasons running before that to about half that figure this year. Glossy ibis, numbering about 330 and cormorants of the large and little species are amongst the last to leave

the roost. Forlorn in the morning calm, broad white blotches are seen on favourite trees in the roost. Nesting cormorants, spoonbills, grey herons, darters and grey pelicans somehow make up, albeit temporarily, for the absence of the crowd.

The year 2000 will be marked in red letters for the death of over fifty birds at the lake, an incident that saddened our hearts. To see a bird die in hand, to see a lake die in hand. An incident, the cause of which was put down to Avian botulinism, the symptoms of which apparently coincided with those of the dead and dying birds. An incident, the result of which could have been a better consensus on protecting the habitat from the relentless march of 'progress' but which instead exposed deep rifts between concerned citizens and unearthed a hitherto covert attempt by certain other people to spare the unsuitable lake, 'unsuitable' to birds they said, for 'private developers' or in plain words, land sharks. Once saved from a ring road that planned to cut across a major inflow channel, once earlier from the now familiar land sharks, the lake faces crisis after crisis and an uncertain future. A project for laying pipelines to divert sewage water from entering the lake, though much needed, destroyed much of the only patch of grassland left in the area - about half an acre. In addition to this, four acres of grassland have been 'afforested', Is the forest department and the core group of concerned citizens opaque enough not to realise the sway of grasslands in the local ecosystem even after we have cried hoarse on the issue? Do they really want more 'productive' forest, as they forsee it? These grasslands are also where people from the neighborhood come to spend evenings with their children. Has the social cost been given even a cursory glance? It is the same rignmarole going on throughout India and the world. And moreover, we as a people are supreme egotists, unbending to sink differences even when crises have to be faced. It is this reason than most that destroys or dismantles environmental campaigns in the country. One can only do what is in ones hands. Fatalism is sometimes inescapable.

2000 was also the year of the rosy pastor, of the blackheaded yellow wagtail and the Demoiselle crane. Huge 'swarms' of rosy pastors apparently swamped the entire area of Kamataka this year, particularly the southern parts of the state. The severe drought in the traditional wintering grounds of Gujarat, eastern and central Maharashtra and northern parts of Kamataka & Andhra Pradesh probably drove the birds south in the way demonstrated well in the case of the Demoiselle crane. In the Mysore region in particular, flocks totalling 7000 birds were met with around the Krishnarajasagar dam in ragl and jowar fields and fruiting banyan trees. A flock of 2000 birds was observed leaving a roost at Hairege Kette, an irrigation tank (five kilometers west of Hunsur (47 Kms west of Mysore city). A siege of about 1500 birds was observed at fields bordering the Yelandur tanks (80 Kms. East of Mysore). Some adults and juvenile birds from the flock were observed feeding on



crustaceans laid out to dry by the fishermen, a hitherto unreported habit! Though the 'seegdi', as the crustaceans are known in Kannada, didn't seem a great favourite among the birds - most of them spent the time crowding into *Acacia nilotica* trees that dotted the fields. Redheaded buntings and rosefinches kept them company in the trees. But to beat all these was a colossal flock of over 20,000 birds observed to come into roost at the Kagalawadi lake near Chamarajanagar (the District headquarters of the newly created Chamarajanagar district, some 60 kms. South-east of Mysore; dry, dusty and perennially in drought). The sight of the flock is something to be experienced first hand - the darkening of an already darkening sky; the absolutely unique noise generated, chaotic and deafening; the unending seas of pink and black with a generous dose of black-black in the form of several hundred cormorants. I doubt if similar scenes can be witnessed every year at the place, I am somewhat justified in hoping for one next year.

The damage caused by the pastors to ripening grain was considerable taking the farmers' complaints into account, but the birds, much to the relief of the farmers, soon turned to the fruiting Banyan and other fig trees that are present in good numbers throughout the countryside. Any fruiting tree could be expected to have flocks of rosy pastors in attendance.

The other bird at hand, the black-headed yellow wagtail, also saw a surge in the number of wintering individuals throughout the Mysore region (Mysore, Mandya and Chamarajanagar districts) with appropriate habitat. The most favoured areas were grassy tank bunds, drying tank beds, 'dry' fields of just harvested ragi and jowar or drying fields of gram and pulses close to water. The wet rice fields were not much patronized. Even new layouts in urban areas had their share of this wagtail! This bird, in all previous seasons, was particularly uncommon although unfailingly present in small numbers at a few favourite sites year after year. The drought factor may have been the reason again, although other yellow wagtail subspecies or the grey and white wagtail showed no appreciable influx as this one had.

Eight Demoiselle cranes were sighted at Ayarahalli, a water fowl counting site in the backwaters of the Krishnarajasagar reservoir, on the 28th of January 2001. A lone greater flamingo, another rarity, also kept company at a distance - a contrastingly beautiful company. A score of new birds - of - prey records for the area as well as several warblers turned up. A particularly significant and incident-trodden year. The year that I shall always remember as the year of the rosy pastor.



The absence or extreme rarity of mammals in the Andamans is a striking feature of the jungles. No monkeys; no squirrels; no deer; no carnivora. This is accounted for by the fact that the islands constituting this group have never been joined to the main land. The presence of the only three species may possibly be explained by their having originally survived from shipwreck.

Birds, on the other hand, are numerous both as individuals and in species. There are altogether about 100 resident kinds, of which one-fourth are peculiar to the Islands. These include a handsome little tree pie; a small drongo; a secretive little bush warbler, discovered by and named after me; a black naped golden oriole; a white myna with black wings and tail; a black naped blue flycatcher; a shama with some beautiful song notes; an orange ground-thrush; a gaudy little sun bird; a large black woodpecker with a crimson crest; a night-jar; a coucal; two large green parakeets; a little scops owl; a green fruit pigeon; a cuckoo-dove; a banded rail and a striking bright chestnut coloured crane. The nests and eggs of 7 to 8 of the above species were unknown when I arrived in the Andamans. Before I left they had all been found and described. The nest of the bush warbler was particularly difficult to locate. The birds frequent the densest low undergrowth and are rarely seen, but their presence is betrayed by their curious, loud, rather jerky shrill utterance of 4 or 5 notes. On the memorable occasion of the finding of the nest I was exploring near the

## Birds in the Andamans

Extracts from the Diaries of B.B. OSMASTON (ex. of the Indian Forest Service)

summit of Mount Harriet in very thick jungle. The rainy season had rendered everything soaking wet. I had heard the characteristic call-note of the bird and had forced my way into the undergrowth. In order to see better I was on all fours.

Suddenly the note of the bush warbler, which was only 5 ft away, changed to what was evidently its alarm call, a clicking sound. I realised that I must be close to the nest and began carefully to scrutinise all possible sites. One of the common plants growing here was a kind of ginger into which dead leaves of various kinds had fallen. In one of these ginger plants, only a few inches above the ground was a delightfully hidden tiny nest. A ginger leaf hung over and concealed the nest which was lined with bits of dry bamboo leaves. It contained four beautiful little eggs of a bright chestnut red colour, no bigger than the eggs of the British willow warbler. After two years of fruitless search I had at last found the nest of this bird, a red letter day indeed in my Indian experience.

Unfortunately one of the parent birds had to be secured for correct identification. It was sent to the Tring museum where it was examined by Mr Hartert who pronounced it to be a new sub-species, and named it *Horornis pallidipes osmastoni*. Another bird whose nest and eggs had never been described was the Andaman shama. This is a small race of the Indian shama from which it differs in the sexes being coloured alike, and in the abdomen being white instead of rufous. The Indian



shama frequents evergreen jungle and has a superb song, consisting of short phrases of loud clear notes which have a special charm when heard in the silent solitudes of the forest. The Andaman shama is also a denizen of the thick forest, and in spite of what A.O. Hume says of its song, I found it little inferior to that of its Indian cousin. Being anxious to get a nest I decided to provide it with nesting boxes. These were made 9 ins by 9 ins x 6 ins, and were given a large side entrance, suitable for a robin. On March 28th, accompanied by a Burman convict carrying 12 of these boxes, I explored a likely forest not far from Port Blair.

My plan was to listen for the song of a Shama and on hearing it to nail one of my boxes onto a tree trunk nearby, 4 or 5 feet from the ground. In wandering about in various directions I disposed of all my boxes, and the Burman was told to note carefully their position so that I should be able to find them again.

On April 17th I revisited the locality with the Burman, and we succeeded in finding all the boxes, and what was still better, no less than 9 of them had shama's nests in them, some with eggs and others under construction. These results were far better than I had dared to hope for, and the fact that so many had been selected made it probable that natural nesting sites were not easily found. Later I took one nest full of half fledged young and reared them in my house on Chatham Island. I fed them almost entirely on insects which in a tropical climate are available in almost any quantity in the shape of termites, grasshoppers and larvae of various sorts. They became exceedingly tame and were allowed to roam about the garden. At first they were very like young robins in their dappled plumage. Later they grew long tails and put on their black and white, like miniature magpies. The males were very pugnacious. If I showed them a looking glass they would attack their reflection with great vehemence. I found this most helpful when I wanted to catch them in the garden, for although they

were tame and fearless they had learnt skilfully to avoid capture. When the shaving glass was produced the bird would instantly forget everything but his rival and hurl himself at the glass so that I had no difficulty in capturing him in my hand. They were very fond of small centipedes which I found for them under sticks and stones. I taught two of the cocks to whistle a tune 'Way down upon the Swanee River' one reproduced it quite well, the other could only master it partially and would persist in finishing out of tune.

The Andaman banded crane is another bird about whose nest and eggs nothing was known. The colour of the bird is remarkable. All the upper parts are a rich rufous chestnut, the lower parts being striped black and white. The bill is a beautiful chrysoprase green, and the iris of the eye deep crimson. In spite of this conspicuous colouring the bird lives in such seclusion in the thick swampy forests, and is so exceedingly shy that it is very rarely seen. In the 3 years I spent, very largely in the Andaman forests, I only saw the bird three times, but it is undoubtedly widespread, and this is proved by the fact that an American ornithologist, when collecting birds in the Andamans, failed to get a specimen of the crane until he tried setting snares. He then succeeded in taking no less than 60 specimens in one rather restricted area.

A.O. Hume described some eggs, which he attributed to this bird, as being pale dun, spotted and blotched with reddish brown and with underlying grey markings. Such eggs certainly did not belong to this crane which I discovered laid pure white eggs. The eggs wrongly attributed to this crane by Hume were probably those of the Andamanese banded rail with whose eggs they agree.

I found several nests of the ruddy crane, all in damp and rather dense forest. The eggs were pure white and usually only four in number.



## REVIEW

**THREATENED BIRDS OF THE WORLD** [LYNX EDICIONS AND BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL (2000) BARCELONA AND CAMBRIDGE, U.K. EUROS 115 (ABOUT \$103).] **REVIEWED BY AAMIR ALI**, 14 ch. de la Tourelle, CH-1209 Geneva.

This is a majestic, magnificent and mighty book. It has 850 pages packed with useful information; has beautiful illustrations, charts and maps; is the official source for birds on the IUCN Red List; has the support of all the major bird societies of the world; about a thousand experts collaborated in the production; and it weighs 3½ kg. It is expensive @ over \$100 but not for what it is.

It was Peter Scott who, in 1963, conceived the International Red Data Books. The first of these appeared in 1964 while the first Global Checklist of Threatened Birds (1029 species) was published in 1988 by BirdLife International, the successor to the International Council for Bird Preservation. The second

with 1111 birds was published in 1994 and the book under review is the third. It covers 1186 threatened species in detail, each with an illustration and a map. In addition, 727 Near Threatened birds are covered for the first time, but in less detail.

Since 1800, some 103 birds have become extinct; today 1186 species (12% of all species) risk extinction within the next 100 years. Of these, 182 are Critical (facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future eg. Jerdon's Courser); another 321 are Endangered (facing a very high risk of extinction in the medium-term future eg. Black-necked stork). Other categories are Conservation Dependent (dependent on a specific conservation programme eg. Dalmatian Pelican) and Data Deficient (inadequate information to make an assessment eg. Andaman crane). The extinction risk has been evaluated against objective criteria.

The extinction of species has, of course, been a regular feature of the evolutionary process. But while the rate used to be



about one species dying out every 100 years, it has now accelerated to 50 times that rate. The prediction is that 460 species will be extinct by 2100: six years ago the prediction was 400. We moderns do love speed.

It doesn't need experts to tell us that human beings and their activities are the main threat. Habitat loss and degradation threaten 1008 species, or 85% of all threatened birds. Of these, 74% are affected by the recent catastrophic loss of tropical forests: between 1960 and 1990, 20% of all forests or 4.5 million km<sup>2</sup> were cleared, mainly for logging and conversion to agriculture. Over 90% of threatened birds live in tropical forests. It is not surprising that Indonesia and Brazil are top scorers with the highest number of Threatened and Near Threatened species: 306 and 188 respectively.

Asia has very high rates of forest clearance. The Philippines has the highest proportion of threatened endemics: 86%. There is also a high concentration in the Himalayas but these are mostly birds with smaller ranges and less intensive threats. The pet trade plays a significant part in species-loss which explains the dramatic decline of parrots: 57% of parrots are subject to trapping; the delightful yellow-crested cockatoo of Indonesia (full page illustration) has disappeared from many islands and is close to extinction on others. The price paid for beauty.

The pet trade threatens 111 species; another 256 species are victims of hunting and trapping. Invasive species are responsible for many extinctions, mostly island birds; some 298 species are currently menaced by this.

A particularly welcome feature of the book is the section devoted to Solutions, indicating possibilities for action. The BirdLife International Partnership, comprising nearly a thousand persons in the Bird Life global network, have set 5442 targets, hoping to achieve a measurable improvement in the status of 10% of threatened species by 2004. Several threatened species still need surveys to document distribution, population, sites; so research remains a necessary and vital tool. An example: the Austral Rail hadn't been recorded since 1959, but intensive targeted surveys in 1998-99 discovered it in several places.

For 1033 species, enough data is available to set targets; action can be focused on factors such as invasive species, hunting, pet trade, intensive species management, recovery management, reintroduction, action on sites. For 483 species, the identification of key sites and their protection will be the main target.

The BirdLife Partnership supports people working for birds and biodiversity; it hopes to have individual or institutional promoters for half the threatened species by 2004. These promoters can act in various ways: working with International conventions, developing national protected area networks, lobbying for key sites, generating local awareness. These are all activities to which readers of the Newsletter can contribute.

Another welcome feature is the listing of species by territories. The information on Asian species was compiled from the Asia Red Data Book (supported *inter alia* by the Loke Wan Tho

Foundation, familiar to readers of the NL). India has the doubtful privilege of having 123 of its birds listed, of whom 7 are Critical, 9 Endangered, 52 Vulnerable, 1 Conservation Dependent, 52 Near Threatened and 12 Data Deficient. The Bombay Natural History Society is the BirdLife Partner and there is surely great scope for birders, either singly or in groups, to work with it. In the last issue, our Editor asked us to play our part in the BirdLife's Important Bird Area programme, identifying important sites. The book is a trumpet call to join in.

This is a beautiful book and a pleasure to browse through - such a pleasure that one is tempted to forget that all these hundreds of lovely birds are on the primrose path to extinction - a fate for which we are largely responsible. The number of birders in India has grown exponentially in recent years; may we hope that their efforts will ensure that not all this glory will pass from our world?

#### Threatened Birds of India - Year 2000

Sl.No.	English Name	Scientific Name	Category
1.	Pink-headed duck	<i>Rhodonessa caryophyllacea</i>	EX
2.	White-rumped vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	CR
3.	Long-billed vulture	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	CR
4.	*Himalayan quail	<i>Ophrysia superciliosa</i>	EX
5.	Siberian crane	<i>Grus leucogeranus</i>	CR N
6.	*Jerdon's courser	<i>Rhinophila bitorquatus</i>	CR
7.	*Forest owlet	<i>Athene blewitti</i>	CR
8.	White-bellied heron	<i>Ardea insignis</i>	EN
9.	Oriental stork	<i>Ciconia boyciana</i>	EN
10.	Greater adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos dubius</i>	EN
11.	White-headed duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>	EN N
12.	White-winged duck	<i>Gaina scutulata</i>	EN
13.	*Great Indian bustard	<i>Ardeotis nigriceps</i>	EN
14.	Bengal florican	<i>Houbaropsis bengalensis</i>	EN
15.	Lesser florican	<i>Sypheoides indica</i>	EN
16.	Nordmann's greenshank	<i>Tringa guttifer</i>	EN N
17.	*Rufous-breasted laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax cachinnans</i>	EN N
18.	Spot-billed pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>	VU
19.	Lesser adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	VU
20.	Lesser white-fronted goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>	VU
21.	Red-breasted goose	<i>Branta rutilicollis</i>	VU
22.	Baikal teal	<i>Anas formosa</i>	VU
23.	Martlet teal	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>	VU
24.	Baer's pochard	<i>Aythya baeri</i>	VU N
25.	Pallas's sea-eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucorhynchus</i>	VU
26.	Greater spotted eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>	VU N
27.	Imperial eagle	<i>Aquila nova</i>	VU N
28.	Lesser kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	VU N
29.	*Nicobar scrubfowl	<i>Megapodius nicobarensis</i>	VU
30.	Swamp Francolin	<i>Francolinus gularis</i>	VU
31.	Manipur bush-quail	<i>Pedicularia manipurensis</i>	VU
32.	Chestnut-breasted partridge	<i>Arborophila madagascariensis</i>	VU
33.	Western tragopan	<i>Tragopan melanoleucus</i>	VU
34.	Blyth's tragopan	<i>Tragopan blythii</i>	VU
35.	Solater's monal	<i>Lophophorus solateri</i>	VU
36.	Cheer pheasant	<i>Catreus wallichi</i>	VU



37.	Hume's pheasant	<i>Symatopus humiei</i>	VU	93.	Salyr tragopan	<i>Tragopan salyra</i>	NT
38.	Green peafowl	<i>Pavo muticus</i>	VU	94.	Tibetan sared-pheasant	<i>Crossoptilon barmanii</i>	NT
39.	Sarus crane	<i>Grus antigone</i>	VU	95.	Houbara bustard	<i>Chlamydotis undulata</i>	NT
40.	Black-necked crane	<i>Grus nigricollis</i>	VU	96.	Asian dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus semipalmatus</i>	NT
41.	Hooded crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>	VU	97.	Beach thick-knee	<i>Esacus magnirostris</i>	NT
42.	Masked finfoot	<i>Helopais personata</i>	VU N	98.	Black-bellied tern	<i>Sterna aculeata</i>	NT
43.	Sociable lapwing	<i>Vanellus gregarius</i>	VU N	99.	*Andaman wood-pigeon	<i>Columba palumboides</i>	NT
44.	Wood snipe	<i>Gallinago nemoricola</i>	VU	100.	*Andaman cuckoo-dove	<i>Macropygia rufipennis</i>	NT
45.	Spoon-billed sandpiper	<i>Eurymothynchus pygmaeus</i>	VU N	101.	Nicobar pigeon	<i>Catopxus nicobarica</i>	NT
46.	Indian skimmer	<i>Rynchops albicollis</i>	VU	102.	*Nicobar parakeet	<i>Psittacula caniceps</i>	NT
47.	Pale-backed pigeon	<i>Columba eversmanni</i>	VU N	103.	Long-tailed parakeet	<i>Psittacula longicauda</i>	NT
48.	*Nilgiri wood-pigeon	<i>Columba elphinstoni</i>	VU	104.	*Andaman scops-owl	<i>Otus bali</i>	NT
49.	Pale-capped pigeon	<i>Columba punicea</i>	VU	105.	*Andaman hawk-owl	<i>Ninox affinis</i>	NT
50.	Dark-rumped swift	<i>Apus aculeata</i>	VU	106.	Ward's torgon	<i>Harpactes wardi</i>	NT
51.	Rufous-necked hornbill	<i>Aceros nipalensis</i>	VU	107.	Blyth's kingfisher	<i>Alcedo hercules</i>	NT
52.	*Narcondam hornbill	<i>Aceros narcondami</i>	VU	108.	Brown-winged kingfisher	<i>Polypterus amauropus</i>	NT
53.	*Yellow-throated bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xantholaemus</i>	VU	109.	Malabar pied-hornbill	<i>Anthractoceros coronatus</i>	NT
54.	*Nicobar bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes nicobarensis</i>	VU	110.	Great hornbill	<i>Buceros bicornis</i>	NT
55.	Grey-sided thrush	<i>Turdus leuc</i>	VU N	111.	Brown hornbill	<i>Ananthinus bokelli</i>	NT
56.	Rusty-bellied shortwing	<i>Brachypteryx hyperythra</i>	VU	112.	Yellow-rumped honeyguide	<i>Indicator xanthonotus</i>	NT
57.	*White-bellied shortwing	<i>Brachypteryx major</i>	VU	113.	*Andaman woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus hodgkii</i>	NT
58.	*White-browed bushchat	<i>Saxicola macromyncha</i>	VU	114.	*Nilgiri pipit	<i>Anthus nilghirensis</i>	NT
59.	White-throated bushchat	<i>Saxicola insignis</i>	VU N	115.	Fleethroat	<i>Luscinia pectardens</i>	NT N
60.	Marsh babbler	<i>Ptilinopus pelusius</i>	VU	116.	Chest-backed laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax nuchalis</i>	NT
61.	*Rusty-throated wren-babbler	<i>Spalaeornis badeigianis</i>	VU	117.	*Grey-breasted laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax jerdoni</i>	NT
62.	*Tawny-breasted wren-babbler	<i>Spalaeornis longicaudatus</i>	VU	118.	Rufous-throated wren-warbler	<i>Spalaeornis caudatus</i>	NT
63.	Snowy-throated babbler	<i>Stechyris ogiei</i>	VU	119.	Wedge-billed wren-babbler	<i>Spinoecia humei</i>	NT
64.	Jerdon's babbler	<i>Chrysomma alirostre</i>	VU	120.	Giant babax	<i>Babax waddelli</i>	NT
65.	Slender-billed babbler	<i>Turdoides longirostris</i>	VU	121.	Rufous-vented prinia	<i>Prinia burnesii</i>	NT
66.	*Black-breasted parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis flavirostris</i>	VU	122.	Long-billed bush-warbler	<i>Brachypteryx major</i>	NT
67.	Grey-crowned prinia	<i>Prinia cinereocapilla</i>	VU	123.	Rufous-rumped grassbird	<i>Graminicola bengalensis</i>	NT
68.	Bristed grass-warbler	<i>Chaetomis striatus</i>	VU	124.	*Black-and-rufous flycatcher	<i>Ficedula nigrorufa</i>	NT
69.	*Broad-tailed grassbird	<i>Schoenicola platyura</i>	VU	125.	*Nilgiri flycatcher	<i>Eumyias albicaudata</i>	NT
70.	Kashmir flycatcher	<i>Ficedula subrubra</i>	VU	126.	Andaman drongo	<i>Dicrurus andamanensis</i>	NT
71.	*White-naped tit	<i>Parus nuchalis</i>	VU	127.	*Andaman treepie	<i>Geopelia bayleyi</i>	NT
72.	Beautiful nuthatch	<i>Sitta formosa</i>	VU	128.	*Andaman crake	<i>Rallina cinnamomi</i>	DD
73.	*Green avadavat	<i>Amandava formosa</i>	VU	129.	*Nicobar scops-owl	<i>Otus alus</i>	DD
74.	Yellow weaver	<i>Ploceus megathychus</i>	VU				
75.	Dalmatian pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	DD N				
76.	Persian shearwater	<i>Puffinus persicus</i>	NT N				
77.	Oriental darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	NT				
78.	Painted stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	NT				
79.	Black-necked stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i>	NT				
80.	Black-headed ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocoryphus</i>	NT				
81.	Lesser flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus minor</i>	NT				
82.	Ferruginous duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	NT				
83.	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	NT N				
84.	Lesser fish-eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga humilis</i>	NT				
85.	Grey-headed fish-eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyophaga</i>	NT				
86.	Cinereous vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	NT				
87.	Red-headed vulture	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	NT				
88.	*Nicobar serpent-eagle	<i>Spilornis minimus</i>	NT				
89.	*Andaman serpent-eagle	<i>Spilornis alpinus</i>	NT				
90.	Pallid hamlet	<i>Circus macurus</i>	NT				
91.	*Nicobar scarrowhawk	<i>Accipiter burtard</i>	NT				
92.	White-cheeked partridge	<i>Arborophila atrigularis</i>	NT				

Cat.	Category	No.
EX	Extinct	2
CR	Critical	7
EN	Endangered	10
VU	Vulnerable	57
CD	Conservation Dependent	1
NT	Near Threatened	52
DD	Data Deficient	2
N=	Non-breeding visitor	
*=	54 species are endemic to India	



## Reference :

BirdLife International (2000) Threatened Birds of the World. Barcelona and Cambridge, UK: Lynx Edicions and BirdLife International.





**ANNOUNCEMENT. AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545, Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034**

A BIBLIOGRAPHIC INDEX TO THE BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT, compiled by Aasheesh Pittie, is an electronic database using the abridged Papyrus Retriever programme of the popular bibliographic software PYPYRUS. This database is being constantly updated and fine tuned and contains (as on date) 18,000+ references gleaned from 650+ published sources and is indexed on 4,000+ keywords. This database does not purport to be a COMPLETE bibliography of Ornithological literature for the region it covers, but is the most comprehensive produced anywhere to date.

This keyword-based bibliographic database covers the Indian Subcontinent, which for the purposes of this work consists of the areas within the political boundaries of the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Maldiv Islands, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In addition, Tibet is also covered.

This database is an indispensable reference tool for all those interested in the birds of this region. Ornithologists, amateur birdwatchers, faculty of universities, editors of ornithological journals, newsletters, etc., research scholars, etc.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

**LETTER, DATED 1ST MAY 2001, LAVKUMAR KHACHER, Hinglaj Baug, Vashishta, Arunachal Pradesh 195 103**

As ever, receiving the NL is a pleasure. I have just received Vol. 41, No. 2, and have some responses to the Editorial.

The Ahmedabad Earthquake should read the Kachchh Earthquake. Ahmedabad hogged the limelight because many poorly constructed highrises collapsed. What should worry us is that apart from our several birding friends in and around Bhuj who may have suffered, the earthquake may have altered the levels in the Great Rann. If so, the future of the flamingos is cause for concern. A centimeter rise in level could change water flows. I intend keeping an eye during the year. Perhaps

the Bill Selover bequest could be aside for a field trip to the area following the monsoon. Or, why not add the amount to the corps of the NL for Birdwatchers.

While I agree to the Donation to BirdLife International being transferred to BNHS, I find your reporting "I have spoken to their Director, Dr. Asad Rahmani, and he welcomes the idea" most amusing. Who would not welcome receiving money? Perhaps the amount should be spent on producing a series of picture cards and a photo calendar on the dams with a view to raise more money for the Newsletter - and ICBN through BNHS.

The Peter Jackson Prize is quite cuckoo brained. How does one verify the number of birds seen? Instead, why not have a photo competition for young amateurs? the prize should carry a citation signed by yourself and Peter (?)

I trust your heart is ticking away strongly. Look after yourself. That makes me suggest why not develop a list of birdwatchers and award the citation and the prize to the oldest, active birdwatchers alive? We all could strive to get recognition by living longer and continuing to subscribe to the NL!



**THE MYSTERY OF THE DEAD EMERALD DOVES, Lt. Gen. B.C. NANDA, Hebbettagiri, K. Nidugane P.O., Madikeri 571 201, Kodagu Dist.**

My wife and I live in a house on the Western Ghats. It is located close to the crest of a hill at an altitude of approx. 4,300 ft. above sea level. For those who are technical and specific the location is approximately 12°27' North and 75°43' East.

We have planted trees and coffee around the house except for the area North and South. As the trees grew the bird population increased and now we have such a variety of bird song and colourful display that from dawn to dusk there is never a moment that a bird lover cannot cherish.

Among the birds that frequent this area is the beautiful emerald dove (*Chalcophaps indica*). My wife found one of these beautiful birds lying dead near the door to the South of our house on the 11th of September 2000.

Not very much later, on 3rd October 2000, I found another emerald dove near the front door to the North of the house. Both birds appeared to have died in the daytime. Not being scientists or ornithologists their deaths remained a mystery to us in spite of our amateur detective work.

Then on 6th February 2001 at about 1200 hrs. I was sitting in our enclosed veranda on the Northern Front of our house and talking to a friend when suddenly there was a whoosh and a thump. On walking out to investigate I found one more of the exquisitely beautiful emerald dove lying dead outside.

I then walked out and had a better look at the door that is half plate glass. All of a sudden the mystery of the dead birds seemed to have been resolved. The flawless glass of the door reflected the trees and coffee surrounding the area so perfectly that it seemed that the vegetation extended beyond the door too! The illusion of the continuity of the wooded area created by the glass door was luring the birds to their unfortunate end.



As birdwatchers are aware, the emerald dove keeps low and flies swiftly. Perhaps the doves found the reflection too realistic. We are convinced that this is the most plausible explanation for the unfortunate fate of the birds. However if any other bird watchers and enthusiasts have another likely theory we would like to hear from them.

We do not want these lovely creatures dying at our doors so perhaps we shall have to do something to distort the reflection in the glass in the near future.



**COOPERATIVE HUNTING AMONG BIRDS, KIRAN KATIKANENI, F#13, B#3, MIGH-2, B.L. Pally, Hyderabad, A.P. 500 044**

First, I apologise for writing so illegibly. And at the same time thank you for the response. I have written about the article by Mr. Madhav Gadgil in which the author doubts about the intelligent way of co-operative hunting among the birds.

He feels that this way of hunting is almost unheard of or unseen among the birds. But I feel that this is incorrect. There can be any number of examples given to prove this point. I give two instances which exemplify this aspect. They are :

(i) The Harris' hawks of the south-western deserts of the US have attained perfection in the co-operative hunting strategy. Their main prey being the desert hares they form a 'hunting party' in which all the adult members contribute. And when the prey is brought down the Alpha female gets to eat first followed by the members according to the pecking order. Their team-association being so perfectly co-ordinated and usually successful they are known as the 'Flying Wolves'.

(ii) The African crowned eagle being a predator of the dense ever-green forests needs to hunt among the thick vegetation where prey visibility and accuracy while the final swoop may be compromised.

To overcome this they have evolved co-operative hunting with their mates.

Once the eagles target their prey among the forest canopy, the male makes an aerial sortie with a frightening call to scare the monkey troop. As the troop gets disbanded and in the process the young members get separated the female makes the final decisive swoop to make the kill. She usually decapitates the prey before flying off to the nest with the kill.

There are many more instances in the avian kingdom to quote from. As Aasheesh Pittie has told me about the most common and well-known example of the pelicans driving their prey into the shallows.

These two instances were shown on the National Geographic Television sometime ago. I wished to raise this point of mine.

Hope you and the readers would agree to this wonderful aspect of avian adaptability.



**THE TEALS AND SHANKS, URUJ SHAHID (Age 17), Near Panditchakki, Moh-Maharaj Nagar, Lakhimpurkheri 262 701**

On the morning of Friday 12th January, I heard the unfamiliar bird calls coming from the pond. As I scanned with my binoculars, I found that these birds were the lesser whistling teals that were floating on the pond. But, in fact, they were enjoying a sunbath. The pond is situated near our residence and the three sides of this polluted pond is surrounded by human habitation. The remaining side is full of fields and between these green fields the modern trains pass with speed and loud noise. But now the birds have become used to living at a place called Maharaj Nagar in Lakhimpurkheri. This is the first time that these duck size birds have been seen at Maharaj Nagar. I spread the news quickly with the help of my father, and all the forest officials and a conservationist, Dr. V.P. Singh, gathered to see these resident tree ducks. Even now these aquatic birds have been beautifying our town. In the beginning, some ravenous fowlers, along with their fowling pieces, had been looking at these birds in a greedy manner, but they have gone away depressed because these birds are wiser than them.

On 2 February 2001, at about 08.00 hrs., I spotted seven spotted red shanks foraging by probing into the mud with their bills. They were near a small tank and this tank is situated at a distance of half a kilometer from that pond. These birds along with many other water birds such as sandpipers, bronze winged jacanas, dabchicks, egrets, herons, cormorants, storks, etc., are also found around these ponds and tanks. The societies, NGOs and also the satellite channels like Discovery, Animal Planet, BBC and National Geographic, have been trying to save our natural and avian wealth, yet day by day our birds are becoming endangered. Please help save them before these winged jewels of the sky depart from the earth. Remember, we cannot survive in the world without these birds.



**WHICH NIGHTJAR WAS IT? ZAI WHITAKER, Crocodile Bank, Post Bag 4, Mahabalipuram 603 104, TAMIL NADU.**

In February my son and I were terrorized by a nightjar. It was midnight and we were sleeping outside to beat the heat and avoid the brick missiles from renovation work going on in our bedrooms.

Just as we were falling into sweet slumber a nightjar marched into our garden calling loudly and plaintively, Pyoo? Pyoo! Pyoo? Pyoo! Asking a question sternly, and answering it himself/herself. We were not in the mood for birdwatching and shouted Shoo! Shoo! but it just continued. I tried to frighten it into flight but it was firmly grounded and just got louder. Now even our watchman, a sound sleeper, heard it and came out with his powerful torch. He "hypnotized" the bird with the beam and it proceeded to hunch down into the sand, wings spread. He picked it up and deposited it some ten meters from our gate. We went back to bed, muttering about bird-brains. And



just as sweet slumber was returning, we heard the dreaded sound again. Pyoo? Pyoo!



**A MARCH DAY IN BANGALORE CITY, M.G. MUTHANNA,**  
16, Cubbon Road, Bangalore 560 001

We live very close to the zero milestone of Bangalore, which means we are in the heart of the town and yet we see and hear an interesting variety and number of birds throughout the year.

The mornings these days start well before 5 am with the plaintive call of the ever active koel - there are 3 families of koel and they feed on the numerous mulberry fruits which surround the house. The next call is the melodious singer the magpie-robin who roost on a mango tree, scrupulously avoiding, the two bird boxes I have put for them - instead 2 families of squirrels have made these boxes their permanent home!! The magpie robin later forages in the garden whistling many musical notes, which is a joy to hear. A more or less simultaneous visitor is the beautiful black headed oriole with its lovely flute like whistle, as the day goes on it moves from its high perch and visits the now busy flowering drumstick tree, which also attracts the lovely purple sunbird. A pair of sunbirds nest every year in the protective cover of the mixed bougainvillea in the back open verandah. At the moment there are two young ones in the nest who seem to be endlessly hungry and the parents have a busy time feeding them. The chirping tailor birds spend most of the day in the front garden, even taking their afternoon bath in the several water trays placed in the garden. This year they have not nested yet, otherwise they stick together two leaves of any broad leaf plant in the garden and build a nest. last year two young tailor birds joined what I feel is a declining population.

The morning also brings the familiar cackle of the common myna, one pair every year build their nest in the hollow of the mango tree - last year part of their building material was a discarded long tape from a cassette, this tape swaying and rustling in the breeze kept away even crows and saved the eggs and the young ones from harm !!

The roseringed parakeet with its screeching tones is ever present and is generally a wandering bird and spends only a few minutes on the taller trees before it moves on.

The red-vented bulbuls are the other visitors who use the bird bath/water trays and their cheerful warbling gratefully drowns all the other sounds of the neighbourhood.

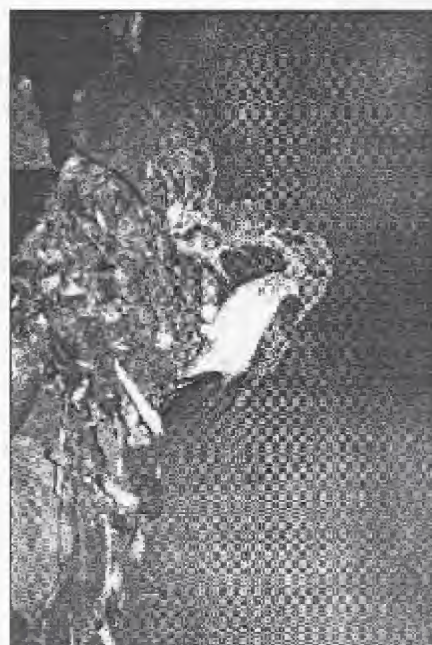
The grey tit is another occasional visitor whose place of residence I am yet to locate.

The cooing of the spotted doves is another peaceful sound. A pair always nests in the tall Ashoka trees in front, the survival rate of the young ones despite my best attempts are few - feral cats being their worst enemies.

The black drongo is always present especially noticeable in the evenings when they swoop down from their perch on the defunct telephone pole to catch insects.

The green barbet is ever present and has given Bangalore another cause for all India fame - because its loud 'Kotar - Kotar' call carries over the TV and Radio whenever there is a cricket match at the Chinnaswamy stadium which is close by to us and is aptly termed the 'Cricket Barbet' of Bangalore."

The evening sky around dusk is filled with flying fox which fly eastwards from their roosting trees in the city police commissioner's office to the fruit trees nearby. The shrill screech of the spotted owlet signals that nightfall has arrived.



*Mother sunbird feeding its young.*



**NO DRAINS - NO BIRDS, J.L. SINGH, D3/1, Rites Flats,**  
Ashok Vihar (Phase 3), New Delhi 110 052

Even a cursory glance at a map of Delhi will tell you of the large number of drains and canals that run through it. The number in North Delhi is larger. Among the better known is the Najafgarh drain that runs through areas like Punjabi Bagh, Shashtri Nagar and Kamala Nagar, before emptying itself into the Yamuna near Wazirabad. The latter part of its meandering takes it through heavily built up areas but upstream where it enters Delhi from Haryana, my impression was that it went primarily through cultivated or waste land.

How wrong I was. Of course, I can't be blamed as my impressions were based on a WWF-sponsored bird count I had joined in 1983, when we had counted birds along this waterway. Soon after this count, I was transferred out of Delhi and it is only now that I am back. I decided to take advantage of the holiday on 2nd October and re-visit the part of the drain that I had covered earlier.



I drove to the point where the Outer Ring Road crosses the Najafgarh drain. This is between Sunder Vihar and Vikaspuri for those who are familiar with Delhi. At this point, a narrow paved road runs along the drain all the way up to the point where the drain crosses Shivali Road. The erstwhile Najafgarh Road is now named after the Maratha hero. The distance covered for this portion is of the order of 9-10 kilometers.

What a sea change in the intervening 17 years! At no time along the route did I find a point where I could not see any buildings. At many locations, buildings are now right on the banks of the drain. The drain itself gives the impression of a sewer, albeit a wide one. At most points it is about 30-50 meters wide. The inevitable plastic bags are everywhere as is other garbage generated by humans. A smaller drain entered the main channel very near my start. The water pouring in was foaming and frothing showing that it must have been saturated with chemicals. Obviously, the first casualty is birds.

Not that there were no birds. Only, numbers had shrunk considerably compared to 17 years back. Also, birds that are commensal on man have increased in leaps and bounds. Thus, there is no shortage of blue rock pigeons (*Columba livia*) or common crows (*Corvus splendens*). Nor is there any dearth of pariah kites (*Milvus migrans*) or little brown doves (*Streptopelia senegalensis*). It's the water birds that I had expected that were either missing or visible in very small numbers only.

The birds that I finally spotted on the waters of the drain or on its banks did not make happy reading. I do not intend making an exhaustive list but only cover the more interesting specimens that I was able to observe.

The most common bird was the dabchick (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*). At each location that I stopped there were at least 6-8 or so. I did notice that while dabchicks usually dive as soon as you appear in their field of view, these dabchicks tended to take me for granted and there was little diving. At a few points, there were Indian moorhens interspersed among the dabchicks but in much smaller numbers. At one point there were 15 spotbills (*Anas poecilorhynchos*) on the bank opposite to where I was. These were the only ducks that I saw apart from another 4 spotbills at another point.

The ever present red-wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) was heard more often than seen but did make an occasional appearance. At a few points I was pleased to see a number of black-winged stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*). Cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) were common with a few little egrets (*Egretta garzetta*) also visible. Paddy birds (*Ardeola grayii*) are inevitable on all water bodies in India. At one point I saw a white-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) also. I saw just two white-breasted kingfishers (*Halcyon smyrnensis*); I had expected many more.

Just as it doesn't take one swallow to make it summer in England, it needs more than one swallow to usher in winter in India. I saw one Indian swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) during this

trip. There were some more at a distance but they were too far for me to recognize. I was using 8x20 binoculars and would have required a spotting telescope to have managed to identify them.

On one tree towards the end of my trip, I found half a dozen green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*). They were making their characteristic forays after winged insects as I watched them for some time. Suddenly I found one being chased by a drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*). The tinier bee-eater was flying desperately and wheeling and swerving to avoid the drongo but the larger and more aggressive drongo remained on its tail. I am not aware of the final outcome as the pair finally flew off away from the drain and away from my line of view.

Ultimately, such degradation of good birding waterways is bound to take place in our cities with their burgeoning populations. I remember an article written, if I remember right, by the well-known birder, Peter Jackson, about 25 years back, where he had counted over 100 birds in Delhi in one 24-hour period. I am sure this is not possible now. That's the price of progress. I hope our children are successful in halting such progress as we have failed to do so. [Peter saw 146 birds in 24 hrs. He received the Salim Ali International Award for Nature Conservation last September. - Editor]



**RARE SIGHTING OF PLAINTIVE CUCKOO AT AAKULAM.**  
K.B. SANJAYAN, T.C. XII/1082, Law College Road,  
Kunnukuzhi P.O., PMG, Thiruvananthapuram 695 037, Kerala.

About 10 members of Warblers and Waders, led by Shri C. Susanth, Co-ordinator, was engaging in the annual waterfowl census at Aakulam lake, some distance away. Suddenly, on hearing a fluty whistle, Kishore, an ace spotter, located an Indian cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus*) on a Konna tree (*Cassia javanica*). The tree stood on the side of the lake and was bearing pink flowers all along its long branches, mostly bereft of leaves. On closer examination, it was discovered that the Indian cuckoo was in the company of three other birds of the cuckoo species, viz. pied crested cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*), plaintive cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*) and Indian koel (*Eudynamis scolopacea*).

The typical broad black bands which ran upto its tail were clearly visible on the ventral side of the Indian cuckoo. While the pied crested cuckoo was characteristic with its crest, the plaintive cuckoo was distinguishable by its dark grey dorsal and whitish breast and the Indian koel was represented by a black male one. The solitary birds provided an unforgettable sight of four species of the cuckoo clan perching on the same tree. Incidentally, it was the first sighting of plaintive cuckoo at Aakulam by Warblers and Waders, ever since it began frequenting this spot about two decades back.

Added to the delight was the chance sighting of a black capped kingfisher (*Halcyon pileata*) at the same water front. The solitary kingfisher was sitting on a coconut frond and making intermittent sorties to the water surface (of the Aakulam lake), each time capturing a fish and returning to its perch. The cobalt



blue body, black cap and red bill of the kingfisher was shining in the rays of the morning sun. This sighting too was rare, as black capped kingfishers were never before recorded from Aakulam.

The other members of the group were A.K. Shivakumar, K. Harikumar, B. Gopinathan, R. Muruges and S. Mohith.



**AN INSTANCE OF AGGRESSION AND VOCALIZATION IN JUVENILE GREAT BLACK WOODPECKERS (DRYOCOPUS JAVENSIS). V. SANTHARAM, 68, 1 Floor, Santhome High Road, Madras 600 028**

On 27th April 1995, at Anakkayam near Sholayar (Kerala), I was following the activities of a family party of great black woodpeckers consisting of a pair of adult birds with a young male and female bird, probably just a few days out of the nest. These juveniles were in good plumage in contrast with the adult birds (especially the female) which were in worn-out plumage and apparently in moult.

In the afternoon, I saw the two female birds moving together. The young was constantly harassing her mother for food. In the period of forty-five minutes, the adult bird fed the young one at least twice, regurgitating the food. A little after the second feeding, the duo flew to another tree where they were joined by the juvenile male. The young female bird continued begging for food even as all three birds were perched on the same branch. All of a sudden, the juvenile male which had remained silent all along, seized his sibling's beak and pushed her with some force. At this she retreated to another branch but continued demanding food. A couple of minutes later all of them flew away and disappeared from view.

The juvenile female had a variety of begging calls, the most common being a harsh loud "Churr-Churr", somewhat reminiscent of those of the young koel's (*Eudynamis scolopacea*) begging notes. Once it uttered a call that resembled the calls of the rufous woodpecker (*Celeus brachyurus*) and sounded like "Quenk-Quenk-Quenk". Another resembled the Indian roller's (*Coracias benghalensis*) "Chaunk" call. This was repeated 2-3 times in succession. At Periyar Tiger Reserve (also in Kerala), where another family party of four birds was active (on 17th March, 1996), I heard the begging calls of the young which could be described as "Whichee ... Whichee".

**Acknowledgement**

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**CLAY LUMPS AS NEST BUILDING MATERIAL IN KITES. DR. ARUNACHALAM KUMAR, P.O. B 53, Mangalore 575 001.**

Atop a coconut palm in my residential garden at Mangalore (Lat 12-50° N Lon 74-53° E) a pair of brahminy kites (*Haliastur indus*) is busy building a nest. The construction activity, now on for nearly a fortnight, keeps the birds actively foraging for nesting material, evading the internal menace, the crows, from rifling twigs brought in from hard search and long distance. The base of the palm is littered with assorted bric-a-brac that get dislodged from the nest; among the debris, in the main made up of dry sticks, I chanced upon half a dozen or so lumps of clay. Each piece of dry clay, measured around four by two centimeters. Since that day, I have collected over fifty or so pellets of clay that come tumbling down from the nest, whenever the bird shifts positions. The weight of the dry lumps, many of which still surviving the forty foot fall, size and shape wise, now amounts to nearly 600 grams. Also recovered amongst the clay lumps were wedges of wood, and a stone. Both these resembled, in overall dimensions and contour, the pellets of clay.

The coastal city of Mangalore, incidentally, has been the seat of a very prosperous tile industry from centuries. Talc fine clay, garnered from nether corners of the district, lie piled up in heaps at tile factory yards, one or two such units, situated within the city close to the old port built by Tippu Sultan. While it was easy to assume the possible source of the clay lumps the brahminy kites collected, I am quite confounded by the birds' choice of clay as adjunct nest building material.

Ali & Ripley mention that these kites use wool, rags, tow, skin, leaves and such other miscellaneous rubbish to furnish their twig nests. Is the use of clay as an additional material for nest building among kites portend a need based nuance in ekistic ethology of the brahminy kite?

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Cover : Rosy Pastor (*Sturnus roseus*) is a distinctive rose-pink myna, frequenting open country, agricultural fields and grasslands during winter. Large flocks wander and follow locust swarms for considerable distances, uttering harsh *churur* or a variety of grating, chattering and whistling notes. Rosy pastors prefer to roost communally in large congregations in groves, orchards and avenue trees, arriving in flocks and regiments from all quarters to the chosen roosting site by sunset.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS



# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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**Editorial**

**Parks for Peace**

In the July 1996 issue of our Newsletter I wrote about the Parks for Peace proposed by IUCN. I quoted the views of Foreign Secretary Salman Haider about the possibility of an International Nature Reserve in the Rann of Kutch straddling the disputed area between India and Pakistan. Many years ago in June 1966, I had suggested this possibility at the IUCN General Assembly in Lucerne in Switzerland. Peter Scott and several others welcomed the idea, but when I returned home surprisingly I received little encouragement from Salim Ali or any of the others.

Subsequently (whether triggered by the suggestions in our Newsletter, I do not know), but a group of mountaineers, Army Officers and others, promoted the idea that the Siachen glacier (the cause of much suffering between India and Pakistan), should be converted into a Peace Park.

One of the persons who is playing a leading part in this project is Aamir Ali, who is well known to our readers. Let us hope that Siachen will soon cease to be an area of conflict and herald one of peace. I reproduce the report which appeared on the front page of the Hindu of 22.6.2001.

"Concerned over environmental degradation and the loss of life in Siachen, a group of conservationists has proposed that the troops stationed there be withdrawn and the glacier be converted into a Peace Park. The proposal will be formally sent to the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, ahead of his summit meeting with the Pakistan President, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, in Agra.

Mr. Aamir Ali, who is here as part of a group to commemorate the golden jubilee of the Trishul mountaineering expedition, said the conversion of Siachen into a natural reserve offered several advantages. First, it skirted the contentious issue of border demarcation. The reserve, along the Saltoro range, could be jointly maintained by India and Pakistan without reference to territorial boundaries.

Secondly, it would not involve dislocation of populations as the area was uninhabited. Also, it would be an honourable way out for the countries locked in a battle since 1984 on the heights ranging up to 21,000 feet. "If Siachen becomes a trans-frontier peace park, it maybe a way out as no side (India or Pakistan) loses out," Mr. Ali said.



If both sides mustered the political will to convert the Saltoro range into a reserve, technical means were commercially available to verify that it remained that way, Mr. Ali said.

On the "appalling" environmental degradation, he said the troops stationed there generated a huge amount of waste. Because of the low temperatures, the waste was stored in drums, which were later thrown into crevasses. Around 1,000 kg of human waste alone was generated daily, he observed, adding that "all this will come out one day with disastrous effect".

Mr. Ali said both India and Pakistan, who were experienced in maintaining high-altitude parks, would not have a problem in looking after the Siachen area. For instance, Pakistan maintains the Khunjerab National Park and the large Central Karakoram National Park, which will be adjacent to the proposed Siachen Peace Park. India maintains the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary on both sides of the India-Bhutan border. Other Himalayan reserves looked after by India, include the Nanda Devi, the Leibul Lamjao, the Khangchendzonga and the Kishtwar.

The concept of Peace Parks is not new. Mr. Ali said there were 136 trans-frontier parks on the borders of 98 countries. Recently, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Croatia had agreed to establish a cross-border nature reserve, while in February last, Albania, Greece and Macedonia had decided to establish the Prespa park. The demilitarised zone between North and South Korea had also become a nature reserve after it was left undisturbed.

The Peace Park foundation in South Africa, led by Mr. Anton Rupert, was taking a keen interest in such ventures, Mr. Ali said. If India and Pakistan agreed to a "Siachen Peace Park", it would earn them great respect in the international community. "It would be an extraordinary statement as the year 2002 is being observed as the International Year of the Mountains." In the following year, the World Conservation Union will be devoting its regular conference to peace parks."

#### **Edible Birds' nests and Swifts**

In the previous issue, May/June, we carried an article on Swifts on the Vengurla Rocks by Dr. Satish Pande and his friends. On the basis of a project report submitted by them for protecting these valuable birds in the rocks off the western coast of India, they were given the William C. Selover grant of \$500/- . I am sure the money will be well used in the cause of conservation.

I found a fascinating account of Edible Birds' Nests in B.B. Osmaston's Diary, and readers may find it of interest in the light of the project under way in Vengurla.

#### **Experiment with Warblers**

I received an article of an interesting experiment carried out with the intention of helping a species which was being excessively predated upon. It was found that the survival rate of *Prinia subflava* was rather low compared to *Cisticola juncidis*, and since both species were nesting in the same area "if *Prinias* can be saved by being fed by the *Cisticola* and vice-versa, some nestlings may be saved by foster

parents". Two nestlings of *Prinia* were placed in the nest of *cisticola*; and two nestlings of *Cisticola* were transferred to the *Prinia* nest. Surprisingly there was no obvious resentment among the parents of both nests and feeding & other activities continued normally. The ultimate result was that on 1st May '99 there were two fledglings of *Prinia* and two of *Cisticola* surviving. The parent *Prinia* escorted the four fledglings and fed them with serious care. All the 4 fledglings in the *Prinia* nest failed to survive, so the net result was that by transferring the *Prinias* to the *Cisticola* nest there was a net gain of two *Prinias*.

However, though such experiments may be of some intellectual interest to us humans they might result in a serious ecological imbalance and should be avoided.

I telephoned Madhav Gadgil to find out whether he agreed that any disturbance of events in the natural world, even minor ones could be harmful in the long run. One of the points he put forward was that the *Prinias* if artificially supported by human action, might lose their ability to develop strategies against predation or better resistance to the factors which are supposedly leading to their deaths. This is a subject for our leading birdwatchers (Lavkumar, Urfi, Ghorpade, Santharam, Krishna, Subramanya, Aasheesh Pittie & others) to write about. We could get some worthwhile views about the extent to which human beings can tamper with natural forces, supposedly for the benefit of nature.

#### **Nature's Beckon**

Some years ago when Soumayadeep Dutta of this organisation started to write for our Newsletter, I suggested to him that the name should be altered to Nature Beckon's. However, I see that my suggestion has not been accepted but I am most impressed by the activities of this organisation. They have been doing a great deal of work on the ground through awareness programmes, nature camps, wildlife surveys, wildbird preservation camps, plantation and afforestation projects, rain forests conservation, and livelihood support programmes. Their address is : Nature's Beckon, Ward No.1, Datta Bari, DHUBRI - 783 301, ASSAM Ph. 03662-31067. Some of our readers may wish to learn more about their activities.

#### **Unnatural substitutes for wetlands and forests**

It seems strange that such an "advanced" country like the USA should have a policy which permits the drainage of wetlands provided "there is no net loss of wetlands and land owners create or restore others." This is akin to the policy in our country which permits the destruction of forests, provided an equivalent area of barren land is re-forested. Our birdwatching community will recognise the absurdity of these proposals. A natural wetland or forest is the creation of ages, where soil, water, flora, and fauna interacting with one another creates a stable complex, binding the ecosystem together. To destroy these long term assets is unforgivable and the US Academy of Science rightly pointed out that "substitute wetlands were a matter of convenience rather than ecology".



And talking of wetlands, the recent move by the World Bank and the U.P. Government to drain 1800 hectares of land for agriculture, shows that we have not learnt anything in the last 50 years from the vast propaganda of WWF : IUCN to explain to Governments and the public that wetlands are not wastelands but "Liquid Assets" of the highest importance. Our concern is specially for the 2000 Sarus Cranes of the area.



Among various items of forest produce for which I, as Forest Officer of the Andamans, was responsible, perhaps the strangest were Sea-slugs, otherwise known as Trepang, and Edible Birds' Nests. The trepang was an ugly, objectionable looking creature somewhat resembling a large slug, but certainly larger than any slug I had ever met with before. They were about 9 inches long and broad in proportion and were to be found in many localities lying on the sand at low tide. They were collected and removed by a contractor who paid a royalty to me as Forest Officer. The contractor sold them to the Chinese who apparently consider them a delicacy.

The Swiftlets *Collocalia unicolor* responsible for the edible nests are small birds, no bigger than a sand martin. They frequent the coast-line in the Andamans and live in communities, their nests being stuck on the roofs of caves in the rock. The nests are very peculiar being composed of a semi transparent colourless gelatine which is secreted from special salivary glands by the female bird. The secretion is first applied in a tacky fluid condition but it rapidly hardens on exposure to the air. The nest when completed is a half-saucer, fixed against the sloping roof of the cave in a horizontal position. The diameter of each nest is only about 2 inches. The Chinese consider them a great delicacy and buy them by paying their weight in silver. An average nest weighs about 1/2 oz. so the Government Royalty came to about Rs. 1 per nest.

I told my cook to make me some soup from a few nests and I found it quite tasteless and uninteresting. The contractor who had purchased the right to collect these nests in the Andamans removed one crop in the beginning of the breeding season. A fortnight later another crop was allowed to be removed but after that no more.

The third lot usually contained traces of blood mixed with the inspissated saliva showing that there was an undue strain in the production of three nests in quick succession. The contractor's men knew most of the caves patronised by these birds. They thought they knew them all, but I discovered a small well-concealed cave on the Cinque Islands which had escaped their vigilance. It contained 50 beautiful little nests each with two fresh eggs, which is the full complement. Another cave, with much larger dimensions, had its entrance only just above the water level. The opening was alternately open and closed at the fall and rise of the swell, and it was fascinating to watch the birds waiting their time to dart in and out as

The wetlands they inhabit (and which are now under threat) provide the tubers of *Cyperus rotundus* in huge quantities as well as small insects and fish. Once the wetlands are drained the Sarus will feed entirely on cultivated fields and the farmers will become their enemies instead of the co-existence between men and birds which is seen today. □

## Trepang, Edible Birds' Nests and Turtles

From the Diaries of B. B. OSMASTON (1904 - 1907)

opportunity offered. To explore this cave was beyond me as there was deep water below and it was also nearly dark. I think it must have been a sanctuary as far as the contractor was concerned.

Another small kind of Swiftlet used extraneous material such as fine sea-weed, leaves etc. glued together with mucilage to form its nest, but this nest was not edible. Large numbers of these birds built their nests under the wooden roof of the Chatham sawmills, and they darted in and out without apparently being the least disturbed by the continual roar of the machinery and the screeching of circular and frame saws. The material largely used, in addition to the mucilage was human hair. When the convicts on the island had just had their annual haircut, the birds found it a very suitable material. In one nest examined by me the bird had inadvertently formed a noose of one long hair and I found her with her head in the noose, suspended lifeless below the nest.

Turtles are fairly common in the shallow seas round the Andamans. There are two kinds, the large vegetable feeding turtle, which yields turtle soup, and the Hawks-bill turtle, which feeds on fish and yields tortoiseshell. The former is the commoner of the two, the latter the most valuable.

The Andamanese hunt the edible turtle in their dugout canoes on moonlight nights. I once accompanied a hunting party. The canoe was taken out into shallow water with a sandy bottom and paddled gently about in the moonlight. A man, practically naked, stood in the bows armed with a heavy spear. The spear was provided with a loose fitting barbed point which was attached to the canoe by a long strong line. As we moved about any turtle passing us could be distinctly seen against the white sandy bottom. Often it was the shadow of the turtle on the sand that first attracted our attention. The moment it appeared exactly below the man in the bows he leapt off the canoe into the water with his spear held firmly beneath him aimed at the turtle. If he had jumped true the spear would strike somewhere near the middle of the carapace and with the weight of the man behind it, the barbed spear-head would penetrate deeply. Directly the man felt he had made a hit he withdrew the shaft of the spear and, coming to the surface, climbed quickly into the canoe. Now the tug began between the poor turtle and the canoe, but it was an unequal contest and the turtle was soon tired out, dragged into shallow water and lifted into the canoe. These hunts were frequently exciting and not always successful. The man plunging the spear must be experienced otherwise the turtle will rarely be captured. □





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## Bird Census

The subject of 'bird census' has been written about in several issues of the Newsletter (for example Willis, 1978, *A census of the breeding birds of India*, 18(10): 13-15) and of course several birdwatchers commented or wrote about their experiences of counting birds in the Asian Waterfowl Census. This subject has also been addressed in various technical journals like the JBNHS and one piece which stands out is the overview of bird counting methods (in context of Indian birds) by A.J.Gaston (1973, 72:271-283). So approaching the subject again should be a daunting task and the reader may well ask why I intend to dwell on it. The reason is that some very interesting developments by way of field exercises and workshops have happened over the course of an year and I wish to share my experiences and also, if I may, do some loud thinking in the process. One of the events last year was a bird census at Nalsarovar bird sanctuary in Gujarat about which I wrote in an earlier issue of the Newsletter ('Counting birds at Nalsarovar', May-June 2000). Another event, subsequently and also in Gujarat, was a workshop on bird census methods at Hingolghadh about which I intend to write now. But counting birds is a dicey business and the primary question of course is, 'why count birds?', at all.

While traveling to Hingolghadh to participate in the two day workshop on 'Terrestrial and Waterbird Count and wetland Survey of Gujarat State' (organized by the GEER Foundation on 3-4 August), I brooded over this question. Some of the reasons which I could think of were the following: to determine population sizes of endangered birds, to determine the conservation significance of a site, to address bird community composition changes, to determine whether habitat management practices have worked and finally, in experiments. In the last category i.e. experiments I began to think of my own experiences of counting Oystercatchers, while doing my post-doc studies at the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in England (See my article, *The ability of wintering waders to compensate for lost feeding time* Newsletter 38(3):51-52). As the number of birds increase on the feeding grounds the process of interference sets in and each bird then spends more time fighting with others over food items and in the process ends up spending less time on gathering food. The Oystercatchers which I was studying from a hide in the Exe estuary in South England, distributed themselves on a mussel bed and one way to estimate their densities was to count their numbers (using a telescope) in imaginary 20 m squares. However, to be more accurate we marked out the square boundaries by sticking up empty plastic bottles and then it became easier to estimate densities in these squares.

The other question is, 'how are birds censused?' This is an interesting one because bird census methods are several and so one has to choose a method carefully, keeping in view the

species, its habitat and above all the 'reason' for counting. While in some cases a whole/total count is made, in other cases the population is sampled and population indices derived. Usually, for endangered birds, an apprehension first surfaces that a particular species is declining and this leads to conservation action, the first exercise in which is to determine the exact numbers of that species. For instance the Siberian crane once used to winter in sizeable numbers in several wetlands in North India but towards the middle of the last century its wintering ground became restricted to Keoladeo Ghana in Bharatpur. Inside the sanctuary its numbers were easy to monitor in the blocks separated by bunds. Till the 1980's its numbers touched 40 and then, in the late 1990's no sibes were seen in some years.

Now, Siberian cranes are restricted to a particular area and so counting and monitoring them was easy. But what do we do when the bird in question is not so localised, Prakash Gole, from Ecological Society (Pune), had an apprehension that sarus crane was declining in numbers throughout the country and so in 1987 he launched a project to estimate their numbers. Since it was not possible to count each and every sarus he decided to use a sampling method – a variant of the line transect method. Along with birdwatchers from different states he traveled in a motor vehicle in the sarus homeland and counted the birds. (He asked me to join him when he surveyed the northern habitats of sarus in the states of western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Delhi and we traveled deep in remote districts on small country roads). At the end of his study Prakashji had surveyed some 20,000 square km of land and he estimated that the total number of Sarus in the country was somewhere close to 12000.

The great Indian bustard (GIB) – another endangered bird, formerly existing over large parts of India, is now restricted to only 6 Indian states, with the majority being in Rajasthan. Alarmed at its decline the BNHS started a major project in the 1980's, as we all know, to estimate its numbers and study its conservation problems. For Asad Rahmani, the leader of the project, the first task therefore was to try to estimate the size of the GIB population in the country. Since this species is patchily distributed (and does not occur in as predictable a manner as the sarus does in most healthy looking, large sized wetlands) the approach of total counts in those months when the birds concentrate for breeding was adopted. However, besides sight records, intelligent guesses were also made based on interviews with local people and many independent sources. Data supplied by one was cross-checked with other source(s). Also several local naturalists, ornithologists and officials from the concerned forest departments were contacted/interviewed frequently. In a preliminary assessment, Rahmani estimated that the total number of GIB were between 1500-2000. However, a careful re-assessment done in 1994 suggested that the number of GIB's in India could be even less not more than 1000.

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Sometimes when ornithologists address community composition issues they ask the question, *What is the difference in bird diversity between 2 areas or plots?* Bird diversity is an indicator of the diversity of habitats and so this question is really not about any one particular species but the entire community of birds in a given area. Ranjit Daniels, Madhav Gadgil and collaborators asked the question: What is the difference in bird diversity between less disturbed evergreen forest (with dense canopy) and moderately disturbed semi-evergreen forest (with more patchy canopy) in the Uttar Kanara district of Karnataka? They used the method of line transect to estimate densities of different species of birds and from this data estimated various diversity and species richness indices. They concluded that the diversity of birds actually increases in certain disturbed plots as compared to plots having natural tracts of vegetation and attributed this to the creation of a more heterogeneous environmental regime, permitting several types of bird species to coexist ('The edge effect').

And finally, for conservation studies having some estimate of bird populations is essential and in programs such as identifying 'Important Bird Areas' (IBA's) a rough count is perhaps all that may be needed. But sometimes habitat managers and wardens of bird sanctuaries want to know, *how many individuals of each species exist in various habitats*, to determine whether their habitat management practices have worked. In case of various large areas, the method of stratified random sampling is employed i.e. the specific habitats are first identified and then in each one, birds are counted in randomly selected blocks. The bird count at Nalsarovar, reported earlier, falls in this category.

For the workshop at Hingolgaadh, the organizers from GEER Foundation had supplied an information package and I quote below a short passage from it regarding the aims and objectives of the meeting, 'Barring (to a certain extent waterfowl) we do not have at hand, taluka-wise data base indicating rarity or abundance of different bird species bird groups. To fill this gap GEER (Gujarat Ecology and Education Research) Foundation seeks to determine density and rate of encounter for different species/groups and in turn derive suitable indices suggesting relative abundance of different species/groups for different talukas of the state'. In the inaugural session of the workshop, Mr.H.S.Singh- the Director of GEER Foundation, while elaborating upon the objectives of the workshop further, admitted very candidly that sometimes 'the forest department even doubted their own figures on bird populations and so the need to evolve standardized methods for bird census was increasingly being felt'.

The highlight of the first session of the workshop was a proposed plan for a state wide bird census prepared by GEER Foundation scientist Dr.Ketan Tatu. According to the plan, Dr. Tatu suggested, the entire state should be sampled at the level of taluka – the smallest administrative unit, in the following manner. Each taluka could be divided into a number of 5X5 sq km grids. For the purpose of sampling some of the

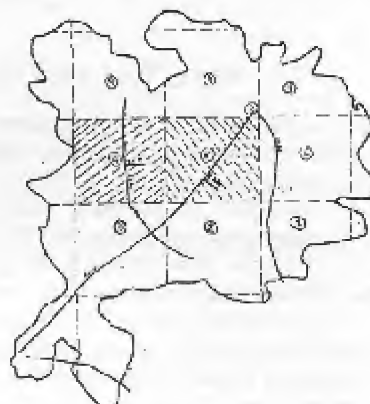


Figure 1 to show a hypothetical taluka divided into 5x5 km grids. As an example, grids 4 and 5 are selected for bird censusing. A one km. long transect is laid perpendicular to the metalled road for this purpose (Redrawn from original).

cells should be randomly selected (Figure 1) and inside the cell a transect of say 1km, perpendicular to a road could be laid out and birds could be counted on a strip, as shown in Figure 2, on a preset date and time, by all birdwatchers of the state, in their localities.

An interesting discussion followed soon after Dr. Tatu's presentation. Many questions were asked, such as: why a line transect method and why not a 'point sampling' method, or just recording encounter rates? Some participants felt that

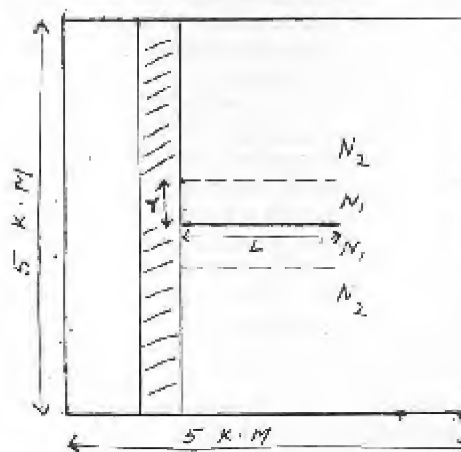


Figure 2. A grid to show how the line transect is laid. Birds are proposed to be counted in a strip 50 m on either side (N1). In addition, birds seen beyond the strip should also be counted (N2). Density is estimated as:

$$D = \frac{N_1 + N_2}{2rl} \log_e \frac{(N_1 + N_2)}{N_2}$$

where  $r$  = width of the strip (e.g. 50m)

$l$  = length of the transect

$N_1$  = Number of birds counted in the strip extending upto 50 m

$N_2$  = Number of birds counted beyond the strip. (The above formula taken from the GEER meeting background papers)



by this method many types of birds would not be accurately censused. The length of the transect itself was the subject of much discussion and this is quite understandable since the transect length has to be modified keeping in view the objectives of the exercise, the habitat and the species. As Andrew Gaston puts it, *"If the objective is to assess the population of bulbuls in a scrub and then a transect of a few km would suffice but a suitable length for coursers might involve a jeep ride of at least 50 km in the desert!"*

In any census program each and every species cannot be censused and so efforts have to be focused on certain species or bird groups. In this context, not surprisingly, 'resident birds' also came up for discussions at Hingolghadh and in a very interesting manner too. Some participants emphasized that 'we' should be more concerned about 'our' birds (meaning breeding residents of Gujarat) and not worry about birds from outside (meaning migrants). Interestingly, the emphasis on 'ours' seemed reminiscent of statements made by some prominent public figures of Gujarat recently, opposing the proposal to relocate some lions from Gir sanctuary to a site outside the state (Statements like, *lion is the pride of Gujarat, we will not allow a single lion to be taken out from Gujarat* etc). But of course, much can be said in defense of the native and as far as bird census are concerned there are solid scientific reasons (and actually no emotional ones) why censusing atlasting programs should focus primarily on breeding residents.

Several other suggestions also came up during the course of discussions and perhaps one of the most significant one was about the need to monitor heronries, a resource with which Gujarat is particularly well endowed. Being a concentration of breeding effort in time and space, heronries are particularly vulnerable to destruction, more so since many of them lie outside the protected areas in village ponds and wetlands in the countryside.

Towards the end of the second day, a visibly pleased Mr.H.S.Singh wrapped up the workshop, and announced that the meeting had been very successful. The first objective, he said, was to have a proper discussion on bird census techniques and this had happened very satisfactorily. The second objective was to create a forum for amateur birdwatchers of the state where they could meet and share their experiences. Someone lamented that a cause for concern was that there were not many young people now taking up birdwatching and somewhere 'we' (the older generation!) had failed. Caressing my salt and pepper hair with my fingers, I casually looked around and noticed that there were actually quite a number of black heads sitting in the sundappled grounds. So inspite of these failures there had indeed been new recruits. Then as I prepared to leave for Ahmedabad I recalled a poem in Urdu titled 'A Boy' by Akhtar-Ullman, which I had read many years ago. I reproduce it below in its English translation by A A Suroor.

#### A Boy

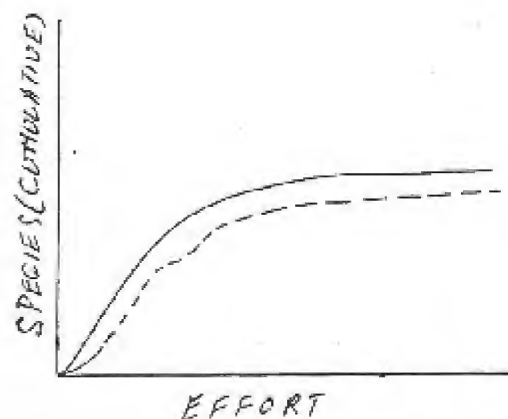
*I tell the boy, 'that the spark is dead  
which once longed to burn away  
All the garbage of the world'.*

*The boy smiles softly and says  
'That is a lie. See I am alive'.*

**Postscript:** Much like Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' meetings such as the above one, 'flash upon that inward eye' and encourage one to think and reflect upon the subject. I write below a couple of points on the subject of 'bird census', about which I have been thinking, for consideration by fellow birdwatchers.

**1. Need for preparatory exercises:** While we all agree that it is going to be voluntary inputs from amateur birdwatchers that is going to go in to produce reports on bird distributions (much like the AWC and Salim Ali Count) some preliminary exercises need to be done in the field first. A very fundamental ecological exercise before any studies of the above kind are undertaken is to understand how bird recording relates to birdwatching effort, in terms of hours spent in the field or number of km covered etc, for a variety of bird habitats and seasons. The general nature of such relationships is described in Figure 3. Such exercises need to be built in the study program in order to standardize the inputs from volunteers.

**2. A breeding birds atlas:** As the readers would know, an atlas is a pictorial representation of bird distributions and densities (and also changes in populations if the exercise is repeated periodically and each time the populations are compared with a pre-set baseline) across a defined geographical area. Now with advances in printing technology which enable data to be presented in a visually appealing manner, atlases provide for easy and quick assessment of bird distributions. A very fine example of recent atlases is the 'Breeding birds atlas for the U.K and Ireland (1992)' which



**Figure 3.** A diagram to show how the number of species recorded (cumulative) can relate to birdwatching effort. Two types of situations are depicted one by a solid line and the other by a dotted line but in reality the curve can assume any shape.



has maps depicting distribution, abundance and changes in densities since an earlier study, for most of the birds breeding in the British Isles.

Readers will recall that the idea for having an atlas for Indian birds has appeared before over the pages of the Newsletter and quite a few editorials have also discussed this theme. The plan discussed at Hingolghat workshop does seem to have certain similarities with an atlas program in that it envisages a state wide bird distribution profile down to the level of a taluka. But it seems to be lacking in the rigour needed to

produce a bird atlas and alas, appears to be an elaborate exercise to compile bird data at the taluka level, in a manner akin to producing the civil administrator's gazette.

#### Acknowledgements

I thank Dr.Ketan Tatu for comments on an earlier draft and Shri K.V.Sarabhai, Director of CEE, Ahmedabad for encouragement. While this article was being written I was working at the University of Delhi. I thank the head of the Department of Environmental Biology for providing the necessary facilities.



## The Nesting of *Pitta brachyura* in the Konkan, Maharashtra

SATISH A. PANDE, C-9, Bhosale Park, Sahakarnagar - 2, Pune 411 008

Year	Tree	Ht.	Date	Observer	P	Nests Status
1907						
1.	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	7F	Aug.	VJ	VV	6 chicks, few
2	<i>Garucia indica</i>	3F	Aug.	VJ	VV	5 chicks, few
1993						
1	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	11F	June 19	RK	L	5 chicks on July 12
2	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	10F	June 21	RK	L	4 chicks devoured
3	<i>Terminalia alata</i>	9F	July 12	RK	L	5 eggs laid @ 1/day
4	<i>Terminalia alata</i>	20F	July 12	RK	L	4 eggs
5	<i>Acacia auriculiformes</i>	12F	July 20	RK	L	5 eggs
6	<i>Terminalia alata</i>	12F	July 23	RK	L	5 chicks 4-5 days old
7	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	5F	July 29	RK	L	5 eggs @ 10.00hrs. 9 d. old
8	<i>Bridelia retusa</i>	12F	Sept. 7	RK	L	5 eggs Chicks eaten
9	<i>Terminalia alata</i>	10F	Sept 10	RK	L	5 eggs
10	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	6F	Sept. 15	RK	L	Nest destroyed
1999						
1	<i>Bridelia retusa</i>	10F	July	CS	KH	1 chick, flew
2	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	8F	Aug.	RW	KA	Nest branch chopped
2000						
1	<i>Plumeria acutifolia</i>	8F	Jul/Aug	VJ	PH	1 chick
2	<i>Carissa carandas</i>	4F	Aug.	VJ	PH	Nest destroyed
2001						
1	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	18F	July	VJ	PH	4 chicks, flew
2	<i>Erythrina indica</i>	9F	July	VJ	PH	Active
3	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	20F	July	VJ	PH	Active
4	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	12F	July	AJ	PH	4 chicks being fed
5	<i>Acacia catechu-3N</i>	12F	July	VJ	PH	Status uncertain 3 nests
6	<i>Acacia catechu-2N</i>	10F	July	VJ	PH	Active-2 nests
7	<i>Acacia auriculiformes</i>	12F	July	RL	VA	Active
8	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	10F	July	RL	VA	incubation

\*Obs: RK-Rajendra Kokate, VJ-Vishwas Joshi, CS-Chandrasekhkar Salunkhe, RM-Ram Mone, AJ-Atul Joshi, RL-Rohan Lowlekar \*The height of the nest is mentioned in feet-F. \*The month is when I visited the nest. \*P:-Places: VV-Vindhyavasini temple hill, Chiplun, Western Ghats foothill. L-Gavane Minor Irrigation Tank, Lanja, Dist. Ratnagiri in broken hilly country interspersed with scrub forest, gardens, groves, KH-Khed, in farmland near the Narangi river, Dist. Ratnagiri, KA-Kalamnashi village, Dist. Ratnagiri in deciduous habitat, near human habitation. PH-Parashuram temple hill, Chiplun, Western Ghats foothill, VA-Valpo, Chiplun, Dist. Ratnagiri, Western Ghats foothill.

**Nesting Material:-** Twigs of *Acacia* spp., fibres, grass blades, *Casuarinia equisetifolia* needles, pods, palm-leaf shreds. The nest is smoothened from inside as if plastered. The nest entrance is laterally placed and is liberally covered with wet slimy material. Vomitus of chicks? Slime due to continued rain since the nesting is during the SW Monsoon? Nest toilet is practised by the parents in the early phase as they are seen to carry the shit pouches of the chicks. Later the chicks shit outside the nests by turning their backs towards the entrance which may increase the slime at the entrance. The nest is placed on a horizontal thin terminal portion of a branch usually in a fork, with the entrance facing towards the proximal branch from where the parents approach the nest. The incubating pitta looks fierce and angry due to the typical head pattern, which is the only portion of the bird visible from outside and a hissing sound is occasionally emitted by the chicks when the nest is approached.

**Food:-** Grasshoppers, locusts, ants, earthworms, worms, snail, butterfly, frog, lizard, cicada, moth, dragonfly, mud-wasp.

**Parental Care:-** Both parents feed the chicks, which is confirmed though they lack sexual dimorphism, by the fact that both are seen together on several occasions. They exercise great caution while approaching the nest in the presence of observers.

**Incubation :-** The incubation period has not been worked out and it needs further study. This note is prepared with the intention of highlighting the fact that the Indian Pitta does commonly nest in the Konkan. The Handbook by Salim Ali and D. Ripley states that the nesting of the Indian Pitta is in the North and Central India. The recent publication Birds of The Indian Subcontinent by Richard Grimmett, Tim and Carol Inskipp has mentioned that the Indian Pitta nests upto North



Karnataka, but it has given only the former range of distribution, indicating that recent data from the Konkan and Southern India is not available. The book by Ranjit Daniels also mentions the distribution upto North Karnataka. Since we are working on the photographic guide to The Birds of The Konkan and The Western Ghats and are thereby assessing the current local avian status, we thought to briefly highlight these interesting recent observations. The data indicates that nesting is very much prevalent in the Konkan and further search will reveal several nests all over the Konkan. The area largely remains ignored in the monsoon season since the rains are torrential and movement is difficult. It is only because of the increasing awareness amongst the local birdwatchers, many of whom are my friends and have shared all their observations whole heartedly, that I could get an opportunity of visiting, documenting and confirming the nests mentioned in this report. Photographic documentation has also been possible by persistently braving the onslaught of the monsoon.

**Plumage of the Chicks:** The chicks have a bright scarlet gape which eventually turns to yellowish saffron-orange. The beak is also scarlet with a black spot. The legs are scarlet. The initial plumage shows a spiny appearance to the feathers, which attracts a simile with the porcupine amongst the jargon of the local bird-watchers! The underparts of the immature birds are slaty grey (Not brown) and the white chin patch is also much narrower, the latter two features being different from what is illustrated and mentioned in the existing literature. But since the birds are said to undergo a complete moult, these differences are of doubtful significance and to say that a remote possibility of the pitta seen in the Konkan may be a different subspecies may be taking the subject too far. However it would be interesting to study a bit further on these lines.

**Nest Predation:-** This appears to be significant. The culprits are crested hawk-eagle, rufous tree-pie, bluefaced malkoha, coucal, owl-suspect, since one nest was destroyed at night.

**Occurrence and Migration:-** The pitta is first heard in the Konkan in May. The nesting activity commences in June & ends in September. The pittas are usually not seen in the Konkan after November, when they start appearing in the Deccan. Several such instances of the pittas, juveniles and adults, found exhausted and rescued have been encountered from November onwards. I am aware of at least 3 authentic reports and rescues, supplemented by photos from Thane (Mr. Hema Gupta), Nasik (Mr. Satish Ranade), Solapur (Mr. Shashikant Chincholi).

**Simultaneous Nesting in the Locality:-** Within an area of 50 mts of the various nests of the Indian pitta, active nests of common iora, blackcapped blackbird, tickell's flycatcher, redvented and redwhiskered bulbul, plain prinia, ashy prinia, three-toed and small blue kingfishers, tailor bird, blackheaded oriole, whitebacked munia, large cuckoo-shrike and blacknaped monarch were incidentally noticed. Interestingly on one occasion a grey tit was seen to come near the pitta's nest and peep within, when the chicks showed some hasty movements.

#### Acknowledgment

The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the help and guidance from Mr. Vishwas Katdare and Mr. Ram Mone of Sahyadri Nisarg Mitra, Chiplun. The names of the bird watchers who brought the nests of the Indian pitta to my notice are already mentioned.



## Terrestrial Birds of Gogelao Enclosure, Nagaur (Rajasthan)



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The following observations were made during a period of 8 months (May 2000 to December 2000) from Gogelao Enclosure, Nagaur. The checklist is a by product of our regular visits, meant for the study of the Indian Gazelle in this area.

#### Climate and Topography

Gogelao Enclosure with an area of 5 sq km, is located on 26° 12' N latitude and 73° 43' E longitude in the western side, only 2 km away from Nagaur City, Rajasthan. The land form of this enclosure is a plain with a few sand dunes at the southern side, average rain fall is 389 mm, temperature varies from 1°C to 48° C annually, wind blows here in summer with a velocity of 30-40 kmph and sand storms in summer are very common.

#### Floral Diversity

The enclosure has a typical desert scrub grassland type, represented by *Acacia tortolis*, *Capparis decidua* and *Prosopis*

*eineraria* as a top canopy but the threat of spreading dense *Prosopis chilensis* can be seen in patches in the enclosure. Some other common associates of the vegetation cover are *Mimosa hamata*, *Lycium barbareum*, *Crotalaria burhia*, *Tephrosia purpurea* and *Ziziphus* sp. forming middle canopy and grasses of this area are *Cyperus* sp., *Cenchrus biflorus*, *Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Cynodon dactylon* and *Dactyloctenium aegyptium*. Ornithological observations were recorded at 15 day intervals. Birds were identified with the help of binocular (10 x 50, Sheffield Russian made), characteristics and specific calls of the birds as described by Woodcock (1980) and Ali and Ripley (1987) were referred to for identifying the birds. Observations were recorded on data sheets especially prepared for the purpose. The identified bird species have been listed (Table 1.) following Ali and Ripley (1983).

#### Other Fauna

The major mammalian fauna of the Gogelao Enclosure are Indian Gazelle, Nilgai, Desert Fox, Mongoose, Desert Hare



and Desert Gerbills. Amongst non-mammalian fauna, many kinds of Arthropods, Amphibians and Reptiles are easily encountered.

### Discussion

A total of 56 different terrestrial birds were identified over a period of 8 months from May 2000 to Dec. 2000. A total of 26 families are represented here, out of which, Family Muscipidae is the most dominant (8 sp.) followed by Accipitridae represented by 6 sps.; Sturnidae represented by 5 sp. and Anatidae and Columbidae each representing 4 sp. (See Table No. 1).

**Table 1**

The birds identified are listed below:

**Family: Ardeidae**

1. Cattle egret (44)\*, *Bubulcus ibis*

**Family: Accipitridae**

2. Blackwinged kite (124), *Elanus caeruleus*  
3. Pariah kite (133), *Milvus migrans govidae*  
4. Shikra (139), *Accipiter badius*  
5. Tawny eagle (168), *Aquila rapax vindhiana*  
6. Indian whitebacked vulture (185), *Gyps bengalensis*  
7. Egyptian or scavenger vulture (186), *Neophron percnopterus*

**Family: Phasianidae**

8. Grey partridge (246), *Francolinus pondicerianus*  
9. Jungle bush quail (255), *Pardipula asiatica*  
10. Common peafowl (311), *Pavo cristatus*

**Family: Gruidae**

11. Demoiselle Crane (326), *Anthropoides virgo*

**Family: Burhinidae**

12. Stone Curlew (436), *Burhinus oedicnemus*

**Family: Charadriidae**

13. Redwattled Lapwing (366), *Vanellus indicus*

**Family: Pteroclididae**

14. Indian sandgrouse (487), *Pterocles exustus*

**Family: Columbidae**

15. Blue rock pigeon (516), *Columba livia*  
16. Indian ring dove (534), *Streptopelia decacotta*  
17. Red turtle dove (535), *S. tranquebarica*  
18. Little brown or senegal dove (541), *S. senegalensis*

**Family: Psittacidae**

19. Roseringed Parakeet (550), *Psittacula krameri*

**Family: Cuculidae**

20. Common hawk-cuckoo or  
brainfever Bird (573), *Cuculus varius*  
21. Crow-pheasant or coucal (600), *Centropus sinensis*

**Family: Strigidae**

22. Great horned owl or eagle-owl (627), *Bubo bubo*  
23. Spotted Owllet (652), *Athene brama*

**Family: Apodidae**

24. House swift (703), *Apus apus*

**Family: Meropidae**

25. Green bee-eater (750), *Merops orientalis*

**Family: Coraciidae**

26. Indian roller or Blue jay (755), *Coracias benghalensis*

**Family: Upupidae**

27. Hoopoe (763), *Upupa epops*

**Family: Picidae**

28. Goldenbacked woodpecker (819), *Dinopium benghalense*  
29. Yellowfronted pied woodpecker (847), *Picoides maharattensis*

**Family: Alcedidae**

30. Rufoustailed finch-lark (882), *Ammomanes phoenicurus*  
31. Crested lark (898), *Galerida cristata*

**Family: Hirundinidae**

32. Dusky carg martin (914), *Hirundo concolor*

**Family: Laniidae**

33. Grey shrike (933), *Lanius excubitor*  
34. Rufousbacked shrike (946), *Lanius schach*

**Family: Dicruridae**

35. Black orongo or king-crow (963), *Dicrurus adsimilis*

**Family: Sturnidae**

36. Blackheaded myna (994), *Sturnus pagodarum*  
37. Rosy pastor (996), *S. roseus*  
38. Starling (997), *S. vulgaris*  
39. Common myna (1006), *Acridotheres tristis*  
40. Bank myna (1008), *A. ginginianus*

**Family: Corvidae**

41. House crow (1049), *Corvus splendens*  
42. Raven (1059), *C. corax*

**Family: Pycnonotidae**

43. Whitecheeked bulbul (1123), *Pycnonotus leucogenys*  
*leucotis*  
44. Redvented bulbul (1128), *P. cafer*

**Family: Muscicapidae**

45. Common bebbler (1254), *Turdoides caudatus*  
46. Large gray babbler (1258), *T. malcolmi*  
47. Rufousfronted wren-warbler (1506), *Prinia buehanani*  
48. Rufous chat (1541), *Erythropgia galactotes*  
49. Black redstart (1671), *Phoenicurus ochruros*  
*phoenicuroides*  
50. Pied bush chat (1700), *Saxicola caprata*  
51. Pied chat (1712), *Oenanthe picata*  
52. Indian robin (1720), *Saxicoloides fulicata*

**Family: Nectariniidae**

53. Purple sunbird (1917), *Nectarinia asiatica*

**Family: Ploceidae**

54. House sparrow (1938), *Passer domesticus*  
55. Baya (1957), *Ploceus philippinus*  
56. Common silverbill or  
Whitethroated munia (1966), *Lonchura malabarica*

\*Numbers mentioned in paranthesis are bird numbers given by Ali and Ripley, 1987.

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## Vulture Sightings in National Chambal Sanctuary, Etawah



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I read about the declining of vultures in the articles of Dr S.M. Satheesan (WWF-India Network Newsletter 1999, 9(4): 13-16) and Dr. Vibhu Prakash (Iornbill 1999, Jul.-Sep.: 28-29). Nowadays, it is not easy to locate vultures, once thriving in the district. Decline in vulture population is an alarming situation in the district as well. Vultures play an important role in the eco-system by feeding on animal carcass and clean the environment.

Table 1 shows the sightings of vultures over the past five years in National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS), Etawah. In addition, vulture sightings outside NCS are also mentioned.

A pair of whitebacked vultures breed regularly on a mango tree at Sarsai Nawar situated north of Etawah. Two or three vultures can be seen on the tree every day. The scavenger vulture is the commonest vulture species in the district. More than fifty of these vultures are found near the slaughter houses of Etawah, Bakewar, Khanpur, Auriya and Phaphund regularly. Nests are built in NCS on ledges of ravines and in other areas of the district. I read about viral diseases in vultures in an

article of Lima Rosalind (Newsletter for Birdwatcher, 2000, 40 (3): 38-39). Affected vultures sit lethargically with their heads hanging low, but in Etawah, the vultures appear to be healthy, as successful nesting of vultures is a positive sign.

My house is situated close to Delhi-Howrah railway track which is a very busy track. Near the railway track is an old Peepal tree, which was the roosting site of 300-400 whitebacked vultures until 1994. Ten years ago, a buffalo was killed on the track by a train. All the whitebacked vultures flew down to the buffalo for feeding. After a few minutes another train came on the same track. The train driver wanted to make them fly away so he blew the horn but they did not leave. I and several other people there, tried to disturb them by throwing stones but they did not leave. The train passed over the vultures and in this accident more than a hundred whitebacked vultures were killed and several injured. Many animals die by trains, but now not a single whitebacked vulture comes for feeding on their carcass. This is a sign of the decline of whitebacked vultures.

Table 1: Vulture sightings in NCS, Etawah district, Uttar Pradesh, 1996-2000.

Species	Date	Place	Nos.	Remarks
King Vulture	6.2.96	Tatarpur	1	Sand banks of river Yamuna
<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	9.3.97	Bihar	1	Sand bank of river Chambal
	9.3.97	Panchnada	1	Sand banks of river Yamuna
	11.4.98	Bhareh	1	Sand banks of river Yamuna
	23.5.98	Chakarpura	1	Sand banks of river Chambal
	26.5.99	Panchnada	1	Sand banks of river Yamuna
Indian	9.3.97	Gyanpra	4	Sand banks of river Chambal
Longbilled	9.3.97	Mahua Suda	2	Sitting on ledges of ravines
Vulture	11.4.98	Mahua Suda	2	On the nest built in ledges of ravines
<i>Gyps indicus</i>	23.5.98	Mahua Suda	3	Sitting on the ledges of ravines with one juvenile
	26.5.99	Mahua Suda	3	Sand bank of river Chambal with one juvenile
Whitebacked	6.2.96	Sikrodi	21	On a carcass
vulture	9.3.97	Gyanpura	53	On a carcass
<i>G. bengalensis</i>	9.3.97	Bihar	9	Sand bank of river Chambal
	16.1.00	Jagtoli	7	In agricultural field
Scavenger	14.5.00	Bhareh to	c.60	Sand banks of river Yamuna
Vulture <i>Neophron</i>		Panchnada		
<i>peronopterus</i>				





### Acknowledgements

These observations were carried out while doing field work for the project "Studies on the limnology of Panchnada with reference to pollution and eutrophication" funded by CST (U.P.) Lucknow to Dr. S. Narain. Permits to visit the Sanctuary were kindly given by Chief Wildlife Warden, U.P. Thanks are due to the Sanctuary staff for their cooperation and help during the field work, and to K. S. Gopi Sunder for suggestions which improved a previous manuscript.



## CORRESPONDENCE

**PARADISE FLYCATCHER (Ceylon race?) IN GHAZIABAD.**  
Dr. A.K. GUPTA, 4710887, 8-9 Lohia Market, Ghaziabad.

I am delighted to tell you that I saw a group of paradise flycatchers (*Terpsephone paradisi*) here in Ghaziabad. On 30-6-01 I accompanied my son to the Hindon Airforce Station, about 8 km from my house. Dr. Pratibha informed me yesternight about the presence of some birds in the area. I went with Collins Handguide and Salim Ali's book, and of course my powerful binoculars.

First of all we saw one female in her usual colours, fully orange on the dorsal surface and a black head. Then we spotted a full grown male, all white with its black head. Then another female. Soon after we were surprised to see an orange coloured bird, shaped exactly as the male we saw earlier, full long tail feathers, under surface all white, but with the dorsal surface all orange [see plate 95 of Grimmett et al. for pictures of the two morphs. Editor].

This group of 4 P.F's were on a babool tree and occasionally landing on neem & shesham trees nearby. We found the nest, 2½" wide & 2½" deep in which the female was located presumably incubating.

After this exciting encounter with the flycatchers we were less interested in the other birds around, but there were some which caught our attention. There were many pied crested cuckoos on electric wires, and a chestnut headed bee-eater which I saw for the first time. I noticed that unlike the common green bee-eater it did not have projecting tail feathers.

I list the other birds I saw: cattle egret, shikra, peafowl, redwattled lapwing, green pigeon (*Treron phaeucoptera*) collared dove, little brown dove, blue rock pigeon, roseringed parakeet, alexandrine parakeet, kool (abundant, both male & female), whitebreasted kingfisher, common grey hornbill, hoopoe, coppersmith, green barbet (*M. zeylanica*) g.b. woodpecker, redvented bulbul, indian robin, brown rockchat (*Cercomela fusca*) ashy prinia, jungle babbler, large grey babbler, brahmimyna, pied myna, common myna, indian tree pie, black drongo, house crow. A golden oriole was seen by one in our party.



**EXTENSION OF RANGE OF MALAYAN NIGHT HERON**  
*Gorsachius melanolophus*? ASHISH KOTHARI, Kalpavriksh,  
Apt. 5 Shree Datta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana,  
Pune 411 004.

On the morning of 16 April, 2001, I went for a walk through the Bagdogra Reserve Forest (Kurseong Division) on the outskirts of Bagdogra town in north Bengal, along with Ruchi Pant of ATREE and my colleague on the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan technical core group, Seema Bhatt. The vegetation is a disturbed stand of mixed sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest. At one point we saw a largish bird that flew silently up and through the trees, possibly disturbed by Ruchi's dogs. At first I thought it must be a serpent eagle or some owl, but as it came into focus in my binoculars, I noticed that it was a heron of sorts. It flew once again through the trees, silently, and settled on a horizontal branch, about 100 metres away. It was then that I noticed its colours, the very distinctly rufous neck, black crown, brownish wings, and a distinctly bluish base of the beak. I was confused about its identity, as I knew that night herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) frequent trees, but are usually in groups and anyway have no such colours. On referring to Grimmett et al. (1998), I could definitely identify it as the Malayan night heron *Gorsachius melanolophus*. The description in this book says it is "mainly nocturnal" and "skulks in damp places in forest undergrowth during the day. If flushed, flies off silently into a nearby thickly foliated tree." There is a similar description in Ali and Ripley (1983). Our sighting was in broad daylight (around 7.30 am), and though it did fly off into a tree, it remained for a few minutes on a clear branch, and then walked up the branch into the foliage.

Ali and Ripley (1983) include Assam and Manipur in its distribution, but give no more specifics. Grimmett et al. give the distribution of this species as "NE India", with the map showing it occurring much further east (Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal) than north Bengal. The authors also say that the bird is "probably under-recorded because of its secretive and nocturnal habits". Our sighting confirms this observation, and it is indeed possible that the species is found in a much wider distribution in north-east India. It is also not necessarily found only in "dense evergreen broadleaved forest", as Grimmett et al. record, but seems to also be found in disturbed moist deciduous forest such as this one.

As Krys Kazmierczak (pers. comm.) has cautioned, one sighting may not be adequate to justify a conclusion that the bird's range is wider than currently recorded. However, it would certainly be worth following up on this lead, and if any readers have similar observations, I would be grateful to hear of them.

It would also be pertinent to mention that this Reserve Forest is under severe pressure due to rampant illegal felling; Ruchi Pant reports that in the two years that they have been based in Bagdogra, they have seen it visibly receding. A substantial amount of the felling seems to be to feed the furniture and timber market in nearby towns. We saw quite a diversity of birds, and it would be a shame to lose this patch of forest.

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**LARGE FLOCK OF REDVENTED BULBUL FEEDING ON EUCALYPTUS BLOOM AT PENCH TIGER RESERVE, MADHYA PRADESH.** H.S.A. YAYHA, Chairman, Department of Wildlife Services, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002 (India)

Generally Eucalyptus is regarded as an undesirable introduction in Indian forests but it appears that many of the avians have started making use of this exotic tree. I have seen the house crows (*Corvus splendens*) nesting in colonies in Eucalyptus grove across Yamuna river in New Delhi, the Crimson throated barbet (*Megalaima rubricapilla*) feeding on young fruit/seed bud of the tree at Periyar Tiger Reserve, the Pariah Kite (*Milvus migrans*) and House crows roosting on the Eucalyptus grove in Aligarh, and so on. However, recently, on the morning of January 27, I witnessed an spectacular scene in Pench Tiger Reserve (M.P.) Over 250 redvented bulbuls (*Pycnonotus cafer*) were recorded feeding/sipping nectar of Eucalyptus for about 2 hrs. (0715 to 0930 hr.). The birds used to arrive from surroundings, one by one or in groups, feed for 10-15 minutes and rush back to nearby perching trees in a great rush and play mode. They were making constant "cheen, cheen, cheen ...." contact calls while feeding and leaving the tree. The birds would visit branch to branch, up and down, mostly concentrating on the brighter side of the canopy. In the beginning they concentrated on the two larger middle trees on the road side, but as the sun rose and light spread they moved to other trees as well. In total there were 14 trees of Eucalyptus, all in full bloom. I have never seen such large flocking of bulbuls earlier. While the bulbuls were feeding three white-bellied drongos (*Dicrurus caeruleus*), three goldfronted chloropsis (*Chloropsis aurifrons*), 11 white eyes (*Zosterops palpebrosa*), three purplerumped sunbirds (*Nectarinia zeylonica*) and two blackheaded orioles (*Oriolus xanthornus*) also visited the Eucalyptus trees and sipped the nectar for brief periods.

The bulbuls kept on visiting the Eucalyptus trees and sipping nectar with some intervals for about two hours. All of a sudden at 9.30 hrs all the bulbuls flew away but the white eyes and a flock of honey bees continued feeding. Watching birds in morning's peaceful hours, rising of sun, humming of bees, chirping of birds and the fragrance of the bloom of Eucalyptus was quite enjoyable and unforgettable experience. During the subsequent two and half hours we recorded 55 species of birds in the vicinity of the Pench Guest House. As it appears, the Pench Tiger Reserve supports a large number of avian community and a long term study on the avifauna of the Reserve would be quite revealing.



**BIRD VISITORS TO ROHIRA (*Techomelia undulata*, F. Bignoniaceae), A RARE AND ENDANGERED TREE OF THE INDIAN DESERT DURING PEAK FLOWERING.** M. M. SAXENA, 7P3, The Roost, Pawanpuri (South), Bikaner 334 003

Rohira (*Techomelia undulata*), popularly known as the teak of Marwar, was once common throughout the Indian desert. With the great pressure linked to its high utility, it has attained the

status of a rare and endangered floral species of this biosphere. The tree blooms profusely during winter and is almost draped in its orange-yellow flowers. Such a tree during its peak flowering was located in the Chopasani Housing Board area of Jodhpur (opposite H. No. 17 E 503) and bird visitors to it were observed over a week in January 2001. It was of particular interest because birds are known to play a vital role in the pollination and seed dispersal of the tree - Important aspects for the survival of this rare species.

The most frequent visitors were purple sunbird, indian robin, magpie robin, house sparrow and redvented bulbul. Birds were most active in the morning, particularly during 0800 and 1000 hr. Eighteen bird species were recorded as enlisted below. Purple sunbird-*Nectarinia asiatica*, brown rock chat-*Cercomela fusca*, indian robin-*Saxicoloides fulicata*, magpie robin-*Copsychus saularis*, rosy pastor-*Sturnus roseus*, common myna-*Acridotheres tristis*, brahminy myna-*Sturnus pagodarum*, redvented bulbul-*Pycnonotus leucogenys*, house sparrow-*Passer domesticus*, koel-*Eudynamis scolopacea*, crow pheasant-*Centropus sinensis*, whitebreasted kingfisher-*Halcyon smymensis*, blue rock pigeon-*Columba livia*, indian ring dove-*Streptopelia decaocto*, green bee eater-*Merops orientalis*, house crow-*Corvus splendens*, indian roller-*Coracias benghalensis*, roseringed parakeet-*Psittacula krameri*.



**PESTICIDES KILLING DEMOISELLE CRANES.** Dr. RAJIV SAXENA & GAURAV PARIHAR, MIG-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011 [M. P.]

Demoiselle cranes are regular winter visitors to the Sakdhyia Sagar lake situated in Madhav National Park, Shivpuri district, Madhya Pradesh. In the last 15 years their number varied each year from less than 100 to 7000 in 1987-88, depending largely upon the availability of water in the wetlands of Gujarat, and in nearby waterbodies like Dihaila Jheel. They feed in the surrounding agriculture fields at night and come back to Sakdhyia Sagar at noon.

Sporadic reports hinted that a few of them die each year after consuming an overdose of pesticide. In the winter of 1990-91 five demoiselle cranes and four barheaded geese were found dead in the National Park. Investigation revealed that they had eaten groundnut and other shoots with an overdose of urea [Saxena, R. (1999) : NLBW. 31(3/4) : 8].

We visited Sakdhyia Sagar on 20 Jan. 2000 to conduct waterfowl census. Two demoiselle cranes were found paralytic in the shallow water near the banks of this lake between two points known as Landing Station No. 1 and 3. Landing Stations were the anchoring places for the boats of erstwhile Maharaja of Gwalior.

Both the birds were alive but unable to stand on their feet and move. Thinking that their feet may be entangled with some submerged material, we alongwith the park staff took them out of water on the dry bank. Their feet were not entangled with anything nor was there any sign of external injury. Despite our helping hands they could not stand, and remained in squalling position. They were sick and frightened. It was a clear indication that they had consumed some poisonous material. Before our approach a



marsh harrier was sitting near by, watching and waiting for this migratory bird to die. We intimated the available park authorities. Sadly nothing could be done. The next day there was no sign of them except some scattered feathers.



**BLUE JAYS RESCUED IN GWALIOR [ M.P.] DR. RAJIV SAXENA & GAURAV PARIHAR**

It is a known fact that Indian roller or blue jay [*Coracias benghalensis*] is worshipped and released in the morning of the festival of Dussera at several places in Madhya Pradesh. But not many are aware that a large number of them die during trapping, forcefeeding of alien food and soon after release. Our NGO- "Society for Environmental Awareness & Research on Culture and Heritage" [SEARCH] closely observed them in Gwalior [M.P.] this year and managed to free 39 of them from the trappers with the collaboration of the Forest Department.

It was noted that the professional trappers catch them three days before the festival. They use a cage, net and adhesive material to trap them. A few die in the process. The remaining are kept hungry for the next three days to show on the day of Dussera that the Nilkanth has blessed the devotees by accepting grain and other cooked food from their hands. Their alien food causes fungal infection in their throats as well as digestive and respiratory problems. After feeding they are bought and released by the people. A long period of hunger and thereafter forced feeding make them incapable of flying swiftly. They somehow fly and sit on a nearby tree branch only to fall down after some time and die.

SEARCH approached Mr. Tapesh Jha, D.F.O. who sent forest personnel with the members of the Society. The team rescued 39 blue jays and freed them. The local media published the proceedings prominently.



**SWIFTS ON VENGURLA ROCKS. VISHWAS D. KATDARE, Near Laxminarayan Temple, At & Po. Tal. Chiplun, Dist. Ratnagiri, Maharashtra 415 605**

You may have received details regarding the Vengurla Rocks, Indian Swiftlet case from Dr. Satish Pande.

We have started a Status Survey of the Indian Swiftlet *Collocalia unicolor* in south Konkan with support from SANCF.

Once again we visited the Vengurla Rock on 6th June and the trip was very adventurous and exciting.

The Swifts have rebuilt the nests with grass and there are 1 or 2 eggs or newly hatched chicks in each nest. As per our estimate five thousand nests are in the cave.

The rock was crowded with terns and their nests. The great crested tern *Sterna bergii* 300, lesser crested tern *Sterna Bengalensis* 5, bridled tern *Sterna anaethetus* 800, roseate tern *Sterna dougallii* 150, were seen on the rock.



**BREEDING COLONIES OF CORMORANTS (*Phalacrocorax carbo*). SUMIT DOOKIA, Department of Zoology, J.N.V. University, Jodhpur 342005 RAJASTHAN**

Inside the south western side of Machia Safari Desert Park, Jodhpur (Rajasthan.) (26° 18' N; 73° 01' E), twin lake of Takhat Sagar Kayalana are situated, which are the main source of potable water for city dwellers. The Kayalana lake with a filling capacity of 190 mcf and run off area of 84 km<sup>2</sup>, is also a center of breeding and brooding by cormorants. The rocky shores of the Kayalana lake is inhabited by the bushes of *Prosopis juliflora*, whose outstretched arid dried and green branches are frequently used by them for nesting.

Visiting the site on 16<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2001, I located an active breeding colony of 29 nests in the densely mingled bushes of *Prosopis juliflora*. This observation was recorded at 8.30 a.m.

These bushes were about 50 mtr. inside the water and the nests were clustered at the top of the tress 2-3 mtr above the water level. 10 x 50m binocular observation revealed that these colonies were purely of a single species with 1 to 3 no. of immature chicks. The parent cormorants were quite busy in feeding their nestlings by capturing fish from the nearly fresh water lake.

These nests were obviously built on bushes, partly inundated with water. All the nests were 1 to 2 mtr from the surface of the water. Is this their preferred location?



**SIGHTING OF GREY PELICANS (*Pelecanus philippensis*) NEAR COIMBATORE, S. ASHOK KUMAR, IAS(Retd), No. 491, Road No 10, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad 500033**

While birding at KURUCHI TANK on the outskirts of Coimbatore city on 23.12.2000, I had sighted five grey pelicans foraging on the eastern side of the tank. This tank is an irrigation tank with a tank bed of 350 acres. There were a number of common teals, spotbills, large egrets, paddy birds and a female pheasanttailed jacana. As the crow flies, this tank is about four kilometers from Sundaka Muthur Lake where I had sighted 22 grey pelicans on 17.12.99. (NLBW, Vol.40, No 2, March/April, 2000). It is likely that the grey pelicans would have come from Sundaka Muthur lake to Kuruchi tank for foraging. Enquiries revealed that the pelicans are not roosting near Kuruchi tank.



**SIGHTING OF SOCIABLE LAPWING IN SHYAMPUR. DIPANKAR GHOSE, Department of Zoology, University of Calcutta, 35 Ballygunge Circular Road, Kolkata 700019, and SRIKUMAR CHATTOPADHYAY, Zoological Survey of India, New Alipur M Block, Kolkata 700053.**

On a winter morning, on 17 January 1999, we were on a routine bird-watching trip to the southwestern part of Shyampur - Budge Budge area, about 25 kms. south of Calcutta. Budge Budge is



an industrial suburb and our field area comprises of large paddy fields interspersed with wetlands. We were gazing through the stubble carefully looking for every little movement of the surrounding avifauna. Four individuals drew our attention. Those were Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius*. The birds were around 100 feet away from us. They were the size of Redwattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, which is the commonest species in this region. However, the head pattern typical of Sociable Lapwing was quite prominent. A broad white supercilium was clearly flanked by a dull brown crown above and another brown eye-stripe below. Dark streaks on neck were also conspicuous. We watched them for about 20 minutes from 09:15 to 09:35 after which all four birds flew to some other area uttering a feeble *wook-week* sound. Other birds present in the surroundings were a pair of Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, few Paddyfield Pipits *Anthus (novaeseelandiae) rufius*, and an Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*.

A flock of eight birds were observed flying overhead on 19 December, 1999 at 11:00 by the second author at Ashuti, c. 12 kms south west of Calcutta. Sociable Lapwings have also been reported during late January in 2000. They have not been seen in the same locality during 2001. The second author is regularly monitoring the area for the birds and any important sighting will be informed in due course of time.

According to Ali and Ripley (1983) Sociable Lapwing occurs sporadically in West Bengal. Grimmet et.al. (1999) denotes that this bird occurs erratically in this region. This bird is also regarded as a globally threatened species.

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**ABOUT THE RAPTORS.** Dr. SREEKUMAR, .B. Srinilayam, Near Union Club, Kottayam 686001.

Now a days a lot is heard about the disappearance of raptors. I will share my observations at Kottayam town in Kerala State. At Kottayam there are no Pariah Kites (*Milvus migrans*) since the last two decades. There were at least 10-15 pariah kites in and around the slaughter house of the town market during the 1970's. They used to roost on two coconut trees standing over there and they used to breed on the near by rain tree. Towards the end of that decade the number of roosting birds came down. At the same time I have come across at least four birds shot during the flight and lying on the road side with bleeding wings and attacked by crows. During 1981 the two coconut trees were cut for building a new slaughterhouse complex. At that time there were only 3 birds seen in and around. After that the pariah kites were not located in that area and in the town of Kottayam.

The shikra is the only bird of prey in Kottayam town.

Just outside the town ie 2 km. from the centre of the town there are paddy fields where the cultivation is done below the water

level, Marsh harriers are regular winter visitors. Occasionally one or two Brahmini kites may be seen. Some time blackwinged Kites may also appear over the same area. There is an increase in the number of brahmini kites in this area since the last ten years.



**SIGHTING OF AN ALBINO ASIAN PIED STARLING (*Sturnus contra*).** AT JAMSEDPUR CITY. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N.S. Road, in front of T.O.P., Malda 732101, West Bengal.

On 11th August 2000 I was at Jamsedpur City of East Singhbhum district in Jharkhand on my way to the Dalma Wildlife Sanctuary.

In the afternoon I was with my brother in Engineers Hall hostel which is situated in the ring road of Telco Colony. At around 1735 hours when I was roaming in the garden lawn I noticed a brownish bird foraging for insects with three Asian pied starlings (*Sturnus contra*) and two Indian mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*). I approached them and identified the brownish bird as an adult albino Asian pied starling (*sturnus contra*).

Its colour was completely brown but the orange patch on the eyes was prominent. The wings were greyer than its other body plumage. The crown was black with a few white spots. I have never seen or heard about albinism in Asian pied starlings, and found this sighting noteworthy.



**CALLS OF FROG MOUTHS (*Batrachostomus moniliger*).** K.V. ELDHOSE, Kavungampilly house, P.B.No. 25, Keerampara P.O. 686691.

As part of a study on Frogmouths at Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary Thattakkad, Kerala, I was on the lookout for this nocturnal bird for the last seven months. It is found that there is a definite difference in the sounds of male and female Frogmouths.

As the male moves from his roosting place it makes a sound "Kuroo-Kuroo-Kuroo" 6 to 12 units. This process is repeated 4 to 8 times. At the same time the female makes a sound "Kwaayihieeff" which is repeated at an interval of 4 to 8 seconds.

Another sound is also heard-"Vicee-vicee Vicee-vicee". The alarm call when a bird of prey appears is "Kwail" produced by both male and female birds.

Sex differentiation from the calls as above is rare among birds.



**RARE SIGHTING OF ORANGEBREADED GREEN PIGEON AT NEYYAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY.** K.B. SANJAYAN, T.C. XII/1082, Law College Road, Thiruvananthapuram 695 037.

Warblers and Waders, a group of birdwatchers and nature lovers, based at Thiruvananthapuram, conducted a bird survey at the



Neyyar Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala during February 18-21, 2001. I, along with 3 other members, was posted at the southern most region of the sanctuary viz. Ananirathi. On 20.02.2001 evening, while we were traversing a rubber plantation, we noticed a solitary orangebreasted green pigeon, *Treron bicincta* (Jerdon). It was devouring ripe fruits from *Lantana camera* Linn. Though the Book of Indian Birds states that this species is mostly gregarious, we observed the rare sight of a solitary bird perching on a bush standing on the side of the pathway, hardly 3 feet above the ground. The bird was olive green with orange breast bounded by a lilac band. It was a rare sighting of the bird.

The other members of the group were S. Mohith, K. Jayakumar and R.S. Liza.

#### **NESTING HABITS OF COMMON MYNAS (*Acridotheres tristis*). K.B. Sanjayan**

A pair of common mynas, (*Acridotheres tristis*) has been nesting in the hole on the tree - trunk of a Mulluvenga (*Bridelia squamosa*) tree, consecutively for the third time in a row in the year 2000. This hole on the Mulluvenga tree has been in existence for the last few years and has been used by common mynas, jungle mynas and Kerala lesser golden backed woodpeckers in turn for nesting. The hole is on the main trunk of the tree at a height of 25 feet from the ground. The tree has a height of about 70 feet.

In the first week of March 2000, a pair of common mynas was frequenting this hole. After about 2-3 days the calls of the chicks could be heard, which became intermittent and louder as the days passed by. By March 24 the chicks were almost ready for their first solo. On March 25, 2000 the first chicks made its flight solo. But may be due to its over enthusiasm, the chick must have jumped out at least a day in advance with the result that it could not keep itself on tree tops even in the company of its parents. The whole day it was hopping around on bushes and sometimes on the ground even as the parents were also feeding the remaining chick in the nest. But unfortunately the immature chick was mauled by a cat on the same day. The next day the remaining chick in the nest also died due to natural reasons.

In the last week of May 2000 the same (?) pair of common mynas again laid eggs in the same tree hole. When the eggs hatched, they vigorously fed the chicks and as days passed by, the chicks were seen on the brim of the nest-hole during the feeding process. But the chicks never flew out. This may be, it is presumed, due to some handicap. Subsequently the chicks (two in number) died in the nest-hole itself before they ventured to fly out. The date was June 18, 2000. It may be recalled that the rainfall in Thiruvananthapuram in June was very scarce and the oppressive heat must have killed the chicks.

Again the same pair of common mynas laid eggs for the third time in early August, 2000. As usual the eggs were hatched and

the parents started feeding the chicks. On August 22, the first chick flew out, but was heavily incapacitated. It could not fly around as any normal chick would have done. In order to avoid the chick from being mauled by cats or other predators (as it occurred in March 2000), Rohith cast a vigil over the chick. The parents were feeding the chick in the open as well as the one that still remained in the nest. On August 23, the parents stopped feeding the chick in the nest as it died. The chick in the open was not sturdy either, but it continued to be in the company of its parents accepting food at less frequent intervals. But unfortunately the chick was found dead the next day morning in the lawn.

For the third consecutive time, a pair of common mynas has failed in their attempt to raise its next generation! Is it due to the adverse effect caused by the presence of any particular chemical in the food taken by the parents for its offsprings? Also, do the common mynas have the habit of repeatedly laying eggs and hatching them until the chicks are really reared?

Now this author is watching frequently to see whether they are going to lay eggs for the fourth time!



#### **THE FIRST RECORD OF INDIAN BLUE BREASTED BANDED RAIL (*Rallus striatus*) FROM EAST MAHARASHTRA. ATUL DHAMANKAR, Green Pigeon Nature Society, Shivaji Square, Chandrapur (M.S.) 442 402**

On 26th November 2000, when I was coming back from Mangli, a beautiful birding site, I suddenly noticed a Rail like bird on a small bridge. The bridge was built across a small nullah, which was over grown with thick bushes and reeds. The Rail was foraging among the reeds and coming out occasionally to the road to cross over to the other side. I waited for the rail to return and soon it hopped on to the road and walked in my direction. When it saw me, it stopped for a moment and ran quickly back to the nullah.

I could clearly see the rail in bright sunlight. The rufous crown and upper neck were clearly identifiable. The upper and lower bands on back portion of the abdomen and tail were also clearly seen. The blueish grey breast was diagnostic and I identified the rail as the Indian blue breasted banded rail.

This is the first record of this rail from east Maharashtra known as 'Vidharba region'. This bird usually forages among thick bushes and reed beds of nullahs. Therefore the sightings are rare.



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**Cover: Black Drongo or King Crow (*Dicrurus adsimilis*)** is a slim, vivacious, glossy, jet-black bird with a long forked tail. It sallies from its perch in graceful arcs, to catch air borne insects. The drongo lives on insects of various sorts; dragon flies, crickets, grasshoppers, moths, bugs and grubs. It also likes the nectar of silk cotton, butea and erythrina trees and thus promotes pollination among these tree species. The drongos often indulge in exceedingly noisy and acrimonious debates and make defiant calls that resemble those of a shikra. They also make sweet-calls like the varied notes of a chloropsis.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS



# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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**The Annual Get-together**

As has become almost a tradition we plan to spend a day at Major BM Appachu's farm, next to my former residence in Dodda-Gubbi on Sunday the 16<sup>th</sup> December 2001. On present indications the Dodda-Gubbi wetland should provide us with good views of marsh and water birds. The eco-friendly programme (to use the new fashionable term) is: Arrive at 8 AM at site for coffee and snacks and spread out into the surrounding countryside singly or in groups as desired. Reassemble at 12 noon at the venue for a talk by Prof. Madhav Gadgil on "From Birdwatching to Ornithology" followed by a free for all discussion on any topic relating to birds and the Newsletter. Lunch at 1.30 pm. Departure as convenient after tea at 3.00 pm. Those of you who intend to come please inform Ms. Vimala or Ms. Shoba at phone: 3364142, 3364682 or Ms. Vimala at 3394252 after 3:30pm or send email to <navbarat@blr.vsnl.net.in> before the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2001.

**Ecological Journey, by Madhav Gadgil**

The latest book by Madhav Gadgil is a rare treat with a new introduction to a collection of old essays. All of its 255 pages are packed with information acquired first hand by visits in the field and by discussions with people whose integrity cannot be questioned. We learn about the dishonest ways by which the so called Environmental Impact Assessments are made to suit the wishes of the people in authority. The initial Terms of Reference themselves are so designed that the investigators are trapped into producing reports which may appear to support the project. A telling example given is of the Konkan Railway Project. The Railways had decided in advance of the EIA about the alignment of the track, and the persons asked to undertake the EIA, the author himself being one of them, were only required to report on whether the flora and fauna adjacent to the railway lines were likely to be affected adversely by this project. A sensible approach would have been to request the investigators to suggest an alignment which would have done the least damage to the environment. As it happens the railway passes through an area prone to periodic flooding to an extent of over a kilometer. To deal with this problem the locals had put up a sluice gate which was opened and closed as required during high tide and low tide, and this took care of the problems of water logging. Gadgil and his colleague on the Committee suggested that there should be an overbridge at that point so that the sluice gate should continue to operate and there should be no water logging as a result of the railway embankment. This important ecological requirement was disregarded with the result that malaria and encephalitis are now taking a toll of the local population. Another striking case of the usual result of development where the interests of the local residents are totally ignored. There are many examples of this kind which proves the point that Conservation and Development considered to be two sides of the same coin, can only be so if there is complete honesty in the assessment of the impact of a project on the ecology of the area. At Rs. 575/- the book is



expensive but not for what it is. As a bonus for birdwatchers one chapter is a reprint of the author's article on the Birds of Bandipur which appeared in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers in Vol. XVIII (5) 1-15, 1978. In fact the entire issue consisted of only this article and is perhaps the best contribution which the Newsletter has received during the past 41 years.

### Mistaken Identity

The letter from Dipankar Ghose and Srikumar Chattopadhyay is very disturbing. Such serious misidentification can cause endless difficulties for subsequent researchers. The Editor must keep his mind on the 'alert' for such obvious errors. I recall that last year I received a note about several hundred whitenecked storks in Kerala. Fortunately I asked the author to re-check. He replied, "Sorry they were egrets".

### A Tribute to the Newsletter

The letter from Dr. J. S. Chhokar of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, is rather cheering. As you see the grant of \$500/- from William C. Selover did result in motivating a dedicated group of Naturalists to undertake a valuable conservation project. I am sure that there are now many competent ornithologists/conservationists/ecologists who have the capacity to undertake useful projects of this kind on the ground, and we are grateful to Dr. J. S. Chhokar for his encouragement, and the implied hope that such grants and activities will continue to save our fragile areas.

### Birds of Pune

We are now being flooded with ornithological literature and this is obviously because there is a demand for such publications as more and more people have taken to birdwatching. I have just received a copy of the Birds of Pune published by Kalpavriksh in collaboration with the Centre for Environmental Education, and support from the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This is a most useful book consisting of 136 pages and available, obviously subsidised, for just Rs. 50/-. Every page is illustrated with birds relating to the text, and a simple description will make it easy for novices to identify the birds they see. There is a useful chapter on Birdwatching—then and now, by Prakash Gole. The Introductory

para reads: "Is birdwatching more popular today than 30 or 40 years ago? The very publication of this book indicates that at least its authors and publishers think it surely is. Not only this book, but such periodicals as the neatly produced Newsletter for Birdwatchers, and the Plita, prove the point. Even newspapers provide sizeable space for bird photographs and news about interesting sightings of birds in the area."

Apart from the sketches to which I have referred, there are coloured illustrations which would be useful for identifying birds like for example, the common hawk cuckoo, even when it is silent and not too easy to distinguish from some others. The Glossary, the Index of Common Names, a List of the Birdwatching Organisations in Pune, a Check List of the Birds of Pune District, and, information about the best places for birding in Pune - all these show that the book has been carefully planned for use by the common citizen.

### Remembering Shri. O. Sudarsanam

I regret to announce the passing away of Shri. O. Sudarsanam the founder of Navbharath Enterprises on 2 - 8 - 2001 at his prime age of 88. It was our good fortune that Shri. O. Sudarsanam was such a broadminded supporter of public causes. Our Newsletter owes much to him for its progress. Mr. S. Rangaswami of Rishi Valley adds:

"I had the privilege of knowing late Sri. O. Sudarsanam since 1989. It was due to his untiring zeal and entrepreneurial vision, wisdom and acumen that Navbharath Enterprises established during the pre - World War II days, rose steadily from its modest beginnings to its present hightech status as a modern printing press. Apart from being a veteran printer he had been supporting many educational and religious causes. When his son Mr. S. Sridhar wanted to take over the responsibility of publishing NLBW years back Sri. Sudarsanam gladly extended his concurrence and support - a step any one else in his position would have hesitated.

I have personal knowledge of Sri. Sudarsanam's liberality of sentiment and I am sorry that NLBW has lost a supporter and well-wisher in his demise. My respectful homage to the departed soul so actively associated with the publication of NLBW in printed format, till the very end of his life."

□



## Birdwatching on 26th January 2001

SNEHAL PATEL, 81, Sarjan Soc., Surat 345 007

This day will never be forgotten by the Birdwatchers of Gujarat who had gathered in Jamnagar to participate in the first bird count to be taken in the Marine National Park.

This count was organised by the GEER Foundation Gandhinagar, and the Marine Park authorities. On 26th morning we were ready to embark with rations and water for a three day stay on one of the islands of the Park when there were tremors and we could hear a roaring sound from the earth. The earthquake had struck. Within a short time the port was closed and the bird count was called off.

Having come all prepared for three days of intensive birding we were reluctant to return to Surat. Having confirmed that every one back home was safe, Nirmala, Mukesh and myself, members of the Nature Club Surat, decided to do some birdwatching on our own in the Jamnagar area.

We started with the Lakhota Lake in the centre of Jamnagar city itself. This lake is a unique venue for birdwatching. There were thousands of water birds which people fed with 'ganthia' and bread. We identified shovellers, pintails, dabchicks and coots, flocks of blackwinged stilts along the edges and out in



the shallower water. Large flocks of seagulls, blue rock pigeons, common and Brahminy mynas and house crows were flying everywhere. The bread pieces were particularly enjoyed by shovellers and coots. Coots would grab bread pieces and swim far out with other birds chasing them. Later in the afternoon we hired a three-wheeler and left for a nearby town on the way to Porbander. We saw several flocks of Demoiselle crane in the fields on either side of the road. Yellow-wattled lapwings showed remarkable skill at dodging the vehicles on the road. The lapwings would just not take off from the road. When the vehicles approached them, they ran to the left if the oncoming vehicle was on the right, and vice versa. Once when there were two vehicles on the road from opposite directions, the birds cleverly stayed right in the centre of the road with the vehicles passing them on either side.

We stopped for refreshments at a roadside eating joint. The countryside was absolutely dry with very few large trees around, but to our surprise we spotted a pair of tree pies on the tree shading us. I have seen this bird only in forests or gardens with plenty of large trees. By this time our driver realised we were interested in birds and so he diverted off the road on to a dirt track to a lake. It was a bumpy 8 km drive with us desperately trying to keep our luggage from falling off. The discomfort was worth it. On the lake we saw lesser flamingoes, demoiselle cranes and pintails.

On the way back we came across a flock of sheep, and riding on their backs were 12 black drongos. The drongos were hanging on the sheep-wool, and frequently descending to the ground to capture insects disturbed by the grazing animals. This was something I saw for the first time. I got down from the vehicle and gradually approached the flock with my camera ready and crawled right into the flock. The birds were not scared at all. I was almost at touching distance; what an experience with the sheep all around me and black drongos perched on them! I was so delighted that I finished a complete film roll snapping photographs of black drongos piggyback on the sheep. This association is very similar to cattle egrets riding cattle or following a tractor. Black drongos seem to be very adaptive creatures. I have seen them hawking insects at night around tube lights. So on to Porbander. In Porbander there is a lake again in the middle of the city which has been designated a Bird Sanctuary. The authorities have put up boards for bird identification. This was a very fine place to see water birds, specially waders, at a very close distance. The lake also had lesser flamingoes, pelicans, shovellers, among other wetland species. On the opposite side of the lake there is an open sewer. Here there were blackwinged stilts, shovellers, common teal, blacktailed godwits, bartailed godwits, a large plover which we suspected was a golden plover. The birds allowed us to approach within fifteen feet. The blackwinged stilts were

all picking up titbits from the sewage and they were trying to be as close to the sewer outlet as possible. It was a text book opportunity to compare the two species of godwits at such a close range.

We had never seen shovellers so close before. In south Gujarat we need a pair of powerful binoculars or a spotting scope to identify the ducks. We were surprised to see that the eye patch of common teal was navy blue instead of deep green. For some time this puzzled us as no book mentions this, but after half an hour when the sun angle changed, the navy blue shade changed to deep green.

Then we moved to the pond across the road and close to Birla cement factory. We were amazed to count some 8000 lesser and 30 greater flamingoes in the foreground, with the factory in the background. Behind us was a residential colony with children flying kites. We settled down on the mud embankment to absorb what we were actually seeing. The flamingoes were extremely confident and took no notice of us or the children flying kites. We had never seen so many flamingoes together earlier, and that too so close. This sight reminded me of pictures of Ngorongoro crater in Africa with its mass of flamingoes. We also observed the greater flamingoes moving their legs forward and backward in the water while standing with head submerged in water. They were churning up mud for food.

In the same water we noticed some different looking grebes which on observation through spotting scope, turned out to be blacknecked grebes. Both these and the dabchicks were swimming and diving close to each other, providing an excellent opportunity for identification. Here there were grey herons and a few waders on the edge of the lake.

Our next destination was Dwarka. On the way some cranes came flying over us and landed behind a mud embankment across the road. We got down from the vehicle and climbed to look over the embankment. On the dry lake bed we saw hundreds of demoiselle cranes. There was a little water only at one end, but the rest of the lake bed of about half a square kilometer was packed with cranes. There must have been about 7000 of them. It was a stunning sight, quite unbelievable. Were we dreaming? Next to the cranes there were people digging and filling tractors to carry away the mud. The cranes were not at all disturbed, and so we gradually ventured down the embankment and settled down to enjoy the great spectacle of the birds against the blue sky. The cranes were drinking water and then moving to the open area. New flocks moved on to join the satiated earlier arrivals.

We decided to make this grand sight the final one of a very memorable birding, and returned home to Surat where we learnt about the huge tragedy in Kutch. □



Travelling south from Karkala town, headquarters of Kudremukh Wildlife Division in the undivided Dakshina

## Birding in a Vanishing Forest

AMEEN AHMED, Wildlife Aware Nature Club, Ghouse Buildings, Horpet Main Road, Tumkur 572 101, and HARISH BHAT, Researcher, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012

Kannada district, the view of the Kudremukh part of the seemingly unending Sahayadri Hill ranges gets closer as you



near Guruvanakere village. It was Christmas time and the sky was haze free. The blue background of these rain forest clothed mountains was spectacular. Beautiful memories from our previous birding outings on these evergreen forest slopes and valleys were revived. In a jeep, we travelled from Guruvayanakere to Belthangadi town after which we proceeded eastwards along the Mangalore - Moodigere road to Kakkinje. Deviating southwards we travelled along a metalled track for eight kilometers, which led us to Neriya village.

Neriya, a quiet village at the foothills of the Western Ghats of Dakshina Kannada district, will soon be overwhelmed by "development", in this case a pipeline to transport petrochemical products. Extensive media coverage about the possible impact of Mangalore - Bangalore pipeline (MBPL) and the vehement opposition to it by environmentalists made us want to study the situation in detail. Accompanied by Guru Prasad, a member of Wildlife Aware Nature Club, and K. Narendran, another researcher from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, we decided to visit some of the areas through which this pipeline would pass. Neriya village being strategically located at the junction of human habitation and dense Western Ghat forests was our obvious choice.

To the South of Kudremukh National Park, the towering Sahayadris continue through lush forests of Neriya and Amedikally. This is considered to be the narrowest forest corridor left throughout the Western Ghats. Adjoining these forests, with the quiet Neriya rivulet flowing on one side, and dense arecanut plantations on the other, lies Neriya village. The team from Bangalore reached Neriya late afternoon, and as it was too late to visit the forest, we decided to look out for birds.

We came across blossomheaded parakeets (*Psittacula cyanocapala*) and jungle babblers (*Turdoides striatus*) within the arecanut plantations. Sunbirds, mainly purple rumped (*Nectarinia zeylanica*), and flowerpeckers, were flitting around some of the flowering plants. Jungle crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) could be seen in plenty around the houses. We walked up to the clear and quiet flowing Neriya stream, and our eyes were drawn to the sight of a huge silk cotton tree. Amidst one of the branches were some chestnut headed bee-eaters (*Merops leschenaulti*), their heads shining as the rays from the evening sun kissed them. They were making sorties in the air and were successful in most of their attempts. A flock of redrumped swallows (*Hirundo daurica*) were also busy hunting but without taking any rest. Lorikeets (*Loriculus vernalis*) noticed by their sharp brief calls, used to appear from nowhere and suddenly disappear among the arecanut trees. On the stream bed a lone little cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*) was sitting amidst the rocks and drying its feathers. A solitary small blue kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) was patrolling the entire length of the stream in search of fish. Walking back towards the village, we saw a few green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) resting on domestic power transmission lines. Also, a lone Blyth's reed warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*) could be heard chirping amidst

some of the low bushes. It was late evening by the time we got back to the village. We decided to rest in the small farmhouse of Mr. Abbas, an arecanut planter. As the evening progressed, a number of Indian treepies (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) gathered on the domestic power transmission line in front of the house. The farm labourers said that these birds roost here every night.

Early next morning we entered the forest, which was adjacent to the arecanut estate where we spent our night. Our strategy was to walk for a day along the survey stones put up by Hindustan Petro Chemicals Limited (HPCL), marking the route along which the MBPL would pass. We then would make a list of all flora and fauna which we would come across. Mr. Dinesh and Ms. Pushpa, members of Dakshina Kannada Parisara Okkoota, Nagarika Seva Trust, the largest environmental organisation of the undivided Dakshina Kannada district, and Mr. Ismail, a farmer from an arecanut plantation adjoining Neriya forest, volunteered to accompany us. The birdlife increased dramatically once we stepped into the forest. A few purple sunbirds (*Nectarinia asiatica*) and Tickell's flowerpeckers (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*) were soaking nectar in wild flowers in a tree bordering the estate. At the corner of the hedgerow separating arecanut plantations from the forest, a magpie robin (*Copsychus saularis*) was calling melodiously. We followed the survey stones of the MBPL and came across many species of birds endemic to the Western Ghats. The forest was of the moist deciduous type, degraded at many places. On the trunk of the tree on which a Malabar trogon (*Harpactes fasciatus*) was resting, was a small bird creeping in a circular fashion. Observation revealed it as a velvet fronted nuthatch (*Sitta frontalis*). A few metres ahead, we stumbled upon a flock of birds feasting side by side. This mixed hunting party consisted of yellow browed bulbuls (*Hypsipetes indicus*), a female scarlet minivet (*Pericrocotus flammeus*), rubythroated bulbuls (*Pycnonotus melanicterus gularis*) and a lone female paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradis*). Walking a few paces ahead we could see to our south, the clear Neriya stream flowing, and noted the gradual increase in tree height. Heavy climbers covered a huge tree adjoining the stream towards us. Amidst one of the climbers were two greater racket-tailed drongos (*Dicrurus paradiseus*), hunting insects in combination. To see the long tails of these dark hunters every time they made a sortie amidst the green cover, was a sight to behold. As we were watching them through our field glasses, Guru pointed out another pair of haircrested drongos (*Dicrurus hottentottus*) in one of the trees. Again, there was a drongo pair hunting leisurely. After observing them, all of us were searching for more birds amidst the high canopy, when Ameen's eyes locked on some movement in the green foliage overhead. All of us saw the solitary green pigeon with an orange patch on its chest. This was the first ever sighting of an orangebreasted green pigeon (*Treron bicincta*) by any of us, a sighting that will remain etched in our memories for a long time.

We walked along the leaf littered footpath parallel to the stream. Undisturbed by our approach, a blackheaded oriole (*Oriolus xanthomus*) carried on its activity on a branch amidst



the high canopy. A jungle owl (*Glaucidium radiatum*) flew from the hole of a huge tree on to a nearby dead branch. Swinging its head in typical owl style, it watched us with alarm from where it was perched. Upon seeing us, a flock of rufousvented laughing thrushes (*Garrulax delesserti*) scattered deep among the undergrowth in which they were feeding. They were in touch with each other through low chirps. The silence of this forest was pierced at regular intervals by the call of a crested serpent eagle (*Spilornis cheela*). Even after carefully scanning the greenery above us, nowhere could this raptor be seen. We continued our walk and came across lush undergrowth of this moist deciduous forest. A bird the size of Nilgiri flycatcher was sitting on one of the many hanging creepers. It was behaving like a flycatcher: sitting at a particular spot and occasionally taking to wing to catch an odd insect or

two. As we were trying to identify it, "Flying Lizard" said loudly one of our team members. Guru pointed his finger at the trunk of a nearby tree, struggling hard to show us this wonderful reptile, but it used its camouflage to outwit us all. As we turned back towards the unidentified flycatcher, it was gone amidst the creepers and undergrowth before we could identify it.

We came across a small dried up nullah, where Harish identified a liana (big robust climber), *Calycotis floribunda*. This is a very special liana for forest dwellers, particularly during summer. When we cut open the stump of this liana, it squirted water that tasted normal and we delightfully consumed it. This liana can give up to 2 litres of water, informed Harish. Amazing vegetation in an amazing forest, natural wealth once gone..... gone forever.

(To be continued...)



## Important Birding Areas in South East Rajasthan for Threatened Bird Species

RAKESH VYAS, 2P22, Vigyan Nagar, Kota 324 005

The review article on, Threatened Birds of the World published in the May-June 2001 issue of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers makes very sad reading on the state of conservation of birds, and their habitats in India. Approximately one tenth (129) of the species, a number of them endemic to India (34 spp.) are threatened with extinction in a foreseeable future.

In the last 50 years, a number of common birds have become endangered due to poaching and habitat loss. The decline of bustard species is a poignant tale of our failure to understand nature and its intricate web, which binds all the species together. We knew mighty little about some of the commonest birds like white-rumped and longbilled vultures, which now feature among some of the most critical bird species in the world. We are stupefied by the sudden disappearance of this most useful bird, which seemed so abundant that it did not deserve a second glance except by a few who watched and envied its uncanny ability to be present at most grotesque places and filthy situations.

I feel that it would be a good idea if all the readers of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers report important sites in their district or region and also the status of threatened birds of India according to Asia Red Data Book. Therefore in the following paragraphs, I am presenting the sites and threatened bird species found in four districts of south east Rajasthan, namely Kota, Bundi, Baran and Jhalawar.

Out of 129 threatened bird species of India, I have recorded 16 in my study area, which fall in different categories of risk to their existence. The break-up is 2 critical, 1 endangered, 4 vulnerable, 1 conservation dependent and 8 near threatened. The sites and important bird species utilizing those sites for feeding, roosting or breeding are presented in the following paragraphs.

**Chambal River Valley :-** The Chambal river passes through a chasm between rock faces as high as 100 meters in some places between Rana Pratap Sagar Dam and Kota Barrage. Rana Pratap Sagar Dam is situated approximately 50 kms up stream from Kota and in between the two of them at about 26 kms from Kota another dam named Jawaharsagar is situated. National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary has its starting point at Jawaharsagar and the cliffs of this part of the Sanctuary have acquired great importance for their vulture populations.

White rumped vultures were one of the commonest sights in Rajasthan because of its high domestic cattle population. In every village or city carcass disposal site, flocks of over 200 birds were a common sight. They were followed by longbilled and scavenger vultures, which always followed when white rumped had opened the dead animal's body. In a number of places one or two king vultures were always present, but waited for the initial frenzy to be over. In winter griffons also joined in the feast. Whiterumped vultures were seen roosting and breeding on large trees on the outskirts of the villages always at a height of over 8 meters. The longbilled vultures had a stronghold on the cliffs of Chambal river Valley, where I presume a population of over 500 birds still survives. At any point of time in a year approximately 100 nests may be seen in different stages of incubation or fledging. In the last two years, I have observed only about 20 white rumped vultures and 2-3 nests have been seen in the last 12 months. Scavenger vulture nests have also been recorded. The latter two species always used to breed on trees leaving the cliffs for longbilled vultures and wooly necked storks.

I wish to take up a detailed study of ecology of the vultures of Chambal river valley and conservation measures needed to save this population and augment their number if possible with the financial assistance from some organization like Oriental Bird Club or Birdlife International.



**Sorsan Great Indian Bustard Hunting Closed Area:** - Situated 50 kms east of Kota, it was a stronghold of great Indian bustard until about a decade back when over 20 birds were regularly seen. Breeding was last observed in 1989-90. The numbers have decreased to a meagre 2 birds and a vast area where hunting was closed has been usurped illegally for cultivation or habitation. Uncontrolled grazing and increased human movement has also caused great damage.

**Canal seepage marshes and village tanks:** - The seepage marshes on Right Main Canal and Left Main Canal, Ummedganj, Lakhawa, Abhedha, Nanta and many other village tanks over four districts of South East Rajasthan were most important breeding areas of sarus cranes in Rajasthan. In the last decade, the number of nesting pairs have dropped in both the breeding seasons i.e., Aug - Nov. & March - May. The worrying aspect is the clutch failures, theft of eggs from the nests and death of young birds due to disturbance. I feel that sarus cranes are victims of governmental apathy towards traditional village water harvesting systems and unabated encroachment of seepage marshes by landowners having their cultivated land close to the canal.

**Udपुरia Village Tank:** - After accidental discovery of a large breeding colony of painted storks at Udपुरia village tank approx. 26 kms from Kota, I have followed the breeding year after year. Well over 250 pairs nested on the trees in the close vicinity of the tank between August - February each year during the past 5 years.

A few pairs of blackheaded ibis also breed on the same trees during summer. This is a small area of about 5 hectares and very easy to manage because of the positive attitude of the villagers towards the birds.

**Alniya & Bardha Dams, Lakhawa Village Tank:** - The dry, shingly margins of Alniya and Bardha Dam and Lakhawa village tank were the stronghold of great thick knee, which once bred in large numbers there. Lakhawa tank is no more suitable due to disturbance and the poor state of the waterbody. The great thick knee are seen on these two medium size dams all over the year. Breeding is observed between May - Sept. every year.

The red headed vulture and Indian darter are two other resident birds, which were common once and bred regularly. Indian darter still maintains its permanent presence at Ummedganj but redheaded vultures are rarely seen.

The wetlands of this region are very important wintering quarters for true migrants and locally migrant endangered bird species. The pelicans normally arrive in December on slowly emptying medium sized dams and large waterbodies and remain till about May depending upon the water conditions and availability of food. Spotbilled pelicans are rare and seen only once in a while among large parties of Dalmatian pelicans.

Alniya and Bardha dam, Kanaksagar lake, Ranpur village tank are some of the important sites where 50-250 pelicans winter every year. Hunting pressure on this bird is also very high for the alleged curing properties of the oil obtained from its fat reserves.

A pair of Imperial eagles is seen regularly on Alniya dam for the last decade. In the last 2-3 years, its presence at Abhedha and Bardha dam has also become quite regular. In all about 5-8 birds regularly visit this part and live close to the wetlands.

The Indian skimmer is a locally migrating bird seen on sandy or muddy islands in the dam beds during summer. It is a very irregular visitor to these parts and so is the case with the blacknecked stork. Although once a pair of these birds started building a nest amongst the breeding colony of painted storks at Udपुरia, but the process was abandoned within a short time. These rare storks are infrequently seen on wetlands and marshes every year.

Ferruginous ducks are regularly seen in small numbers in large waterbodies and typha filled marshes. Black bellied terns are also seen fairly regularly during winter months but never in big numbers. Time and again I have reiterated the need to protect important bird areas like Chambal river Valley, Sorsan, Udपुरia and seepage marshes but to no avail. Still I feel that if we put forth the importance of select areas for endangered bird species through a platform like the Newsletter, it would positively have better acceptance from governmental agencies responsible for protecting these areas.

□



The Himalayas is one of the most sacred natural sites in India and in Hindu mythology it is considered the abode of many Gods and Goddesses. It harbours a wealth of flora and fauna and constitutes the major part of life support system for humanity by regulating the intricate network of rivers and rivulets flowing down to the agriculture dominated plains.

Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary (henceforth referred as BWS) is one such area in the Himalayas, which is not only rich in biodiversity, but is a great attraction for tourists from around the world because of its panoramic beauty and the spiritual legacy. BWS is at a distance of 30 km from Almora District in

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Uttarakhand and was given a status of Sanctuary in mid eighties due to its biodiversity value. It is an oak-dominated forest covering an area about 45 km<sup>2</sup>, which includes 2 km<sup>2</sup> of the core zone. Binsar represents the characteristic flora of moist temperate type of forest as described by Saxena and Singh (1982). The elevation of its highest point is roughly 2450 m whereas the surrounding ranges barely reach 1500 m in altitude.

The forest of Binsar is dominated by three vegetation types i.e., pure oak forest, oak mixed forest and chir pine forest interspersed by agricultural land. On higher altitudes pure oak

## Birds of Binsar



forest comprise *Quercus floribunda*, *Q. leucotricophora*, *Rhododendron arboreum* with shrubs of *Arundinaria* sp., *Myrsine africana*, *Hubus biflorus*, *Daphne papyracea* and ferns like *Athyrium* sp., *Polystichum* sp., *Pteridium* sp.

The lower reaches i.e., oak mixed forest consist of several species of deciduous trees, mainly *Q. leucotricophora*, *Q. glauca*, *Alnus nepalensis* and shrub species such as *Berberis aristata*, *Hubus ellipticus*. The chir-pine forest comprises *Pinus roxburghii*, along with *Viburnum cotinifolium*, *Viburnum mullata* among shrubs *Pyracantha*, *Myrsine africana* and *Desmodium* species. The pine forest is interspersed by the agricultural land.

Binsar is not only rich floristically but has mammal species such as Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Yellow throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*), Barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), goral (*Nemorhaedus goral*), Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) etc. Two such species of butterflies are known to occur in Binsar which have not been reported from any other region of Kumaon Himalayas. These two are Great Satyr (*Aulocera prima*, *Satyridae*) and the Mixed Punch (*Dodona oidea*, *Erycinidae*). Both of these feed on grasses (Sementak, 1985).

Binsar has one of the richest oak forests in Himalayas in terms of the bird species diversity. A total number 166 bird species belonging to 32 families have been identified by me from BWS during the study period from January 1996 to December 1998. This study was a part of the long-term research project on the ecology of Kumaon Himalayas. Our interest in bird watching inspired us to make a checklist of birds.

The maximum number of 54 species was recorded from family Muscipidae. Out of 166 species 2 pheasant species i.e., koklas (*Pucrasia macrolopha*) and kaleej (*Lophura leucomelanos*) and three partridge species i.e., black partridge (*Francolinus francolinus*), common hill partridge (*Arborophila torquosa*) and chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*) were recorded from Binsar. The fascinating Shaheen falcon (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*) was sighted only once during July 1996, 8 species of woodpeckers were recorded from Binsar itself.

After three years of our study for the assessment of biodiversity values we found that the dependency of the locals on the small oak patch is continuously increasing (Orus Iyas 1998; Rana *et al.*, 2000). A total of 32 villages in and around Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary are dependent on forest resources for fuelwood, fodder, timber, grazing and other minor forest produce. Hunting is also one of the threats to biodiversity. Locals kill ground dwelling birds such as kaleej, koklas, common hill partridge and black partridge for food. Due to excessive tree cutting, lopping for fuel wood and fodder, oak forests are being degraded and continue to shrink in size, whereas pine forests are encroaching over the oak forests.

Being a small area of 45 km<sup>2</sup> this Sanctuary has very high anthropogenic pressure. In order to conserve the bird species of Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary locals should be provided some alternative means of livelihood. There is also a need for placing some restriction on cutting, lopping, grazing and a complete ban on poaching birds so that existing anthropogenic pressures may be reduced and bird populations increase in abundance.

### Check list of the birds of Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary

#### Family: Accipitridae

- |                                       |                                     |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Pariah kite                        | <i>Milvus migrans govinda</i>       |
| 2. Shikra                             | <i>Accipiter badius</i>             |
| 3. Sparrow hawk                       | <i>Accipiter nisus melaschistos</i> |
| 4. Upland buzzard                     | <i>Buteo hemilasius</i>             |
| 5. Eastern steppe eagle               | <i>Aquila rapax nipalensis</i>      |
| 6. Bonell's eagle                     | <i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>         |
| 7. Golden eagle                       | <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>            |
| 8. Black eagle                        | <i>Ichthyophaga malayensis</i>      |
| 9. Himalayan greyheaded fishing eagle | <i>Ichthyophaga nana</i>            |
| 10. King vulture                      | <i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>             |
| 11. Himalayan griffon                 | <i>Gyps himalayensis</i>            |
| 12. Egyptian vulture                  | <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>        |
| 13. Bearded vulture                   | <i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>            |
| 14. Crested serpent eagle             | <i>Sphobomus cheela</i>             |

#### Family: Falconidae

- |                    |                                      |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 15. Shaheen falcon | <i>Falco peregrinus peregrinator</i> |
| 16. Kestrel        | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>             |

#### Family: Phasianidae

- |                           |                                |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 17. Chukar partridge      | <i>Alectoris chukar</i>        |
| 18. Black partridge       | <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> |
| 19. Common hill partridge | <i>Arborophila torquosa</i>    |
| 20. Kaleej pheasant       | <i>Lophura leucomelanos</i>    |
| 21. Koklas pheasant       | <i>Pucrasia macrolopha</i>     |

#### Family: Columbidae

- |                                |                                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 22. Wedge tailed green pigeon  | <i>Treron sphenura</i>         |
| 23. Yellow legged green pigeon | <i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>    |
| 24. Wood pigeon                | <i>Columba palumbus</i>        |
| 25. Rufous turtle dove         | <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i> |
| 26. Indian ring dove           | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>   |
| 27. Spotted dove               | <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>  |

#### Family: Psittacidae

- |                             |                                |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 28. Blossom headed parakeet | <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i> |
| 29. Slaty headed parakeet   | <i>Psittacula himalayana</i>   |

#### Family: Cuculidae

- |                       |                              |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| 30. Large hawk-cuckoo | <i>Cuculus sparverioides</i> |
| 31. Indian cuckoo     | <i>Cuculus micropterus</i>   |
| 32. The cuckoo        | <i>Cuculus canorus</i>       |

#### Family: Strigidae

- |                        |                              |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| 33. Collared pigmy owl | <i>Glaucidium brodiei</i>    |
| 34. Barred owl         | <i>Glaucidium cuculoides</i> |
| 35. Brown wood owl     | <i>Strix leptogrammica</i>   |

#### Family: Caprimulgidae

- |                            |                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 36. Indian jungle nightjar | <i>Caprimulgus indicus</i>  |
| 37. Longtailed nightjar    | <i>Caprimulgus macrurus</i> |

#### Family: Apodidae

- |                                   |                         |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 38. Whitethroated spinetail swift | <i>Chaetura caudata</i> |
| 39. Large whiterumped swift       | <i>Apus pacificus</i>   |

#### Family: Alcedinidae

- |                               |                          |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 40. Common kingfisher         | <i>Alcedo althia</i>     |
| 41. White breasted kingfisher | <i>Halcyon smymensis</i> |

#### Family: Upupidae

- |            |                    |
|------------|--------------------|
| 42. Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epops</i> |
|------------|--------------------|

#### Family: Capitonidae

- |                       |                         |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 43. Great hill barbet | <i>Megalaima virens</i> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|

#### Family: Picidae

- |                                   |                        |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| 44. Scalybellied green woodpecker | <i>Picus squamatus</i> |
| 45. Blacknaped green woodpecker   | <i>Picus canus</i>     |





47. Large yellownaped woodpecker *Picus flavinucha*  
 48. Small yellownaped woodpecker *Picus chloroleptus*  
 49. Lesser goldenbacked woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*  
 50. Rufousbellied woodpecker *Hypopicus hyperythrus*  
 51. Himalayan pied woodpecker *Picoides himalayensis*  
 52. Brownfronted pied woodpecker *Picoides auriceps*

## Family: Hirundinidae

53. Nepal house martin *Delichon nipalensis*

## Family: Oriolidae

54. Golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*  
 55. Slanderbilled black oriole *Oriolus chinensis tenuistriatus*  
 56. Maroon oriole *Oriolus traillii*

## Family: Dicruridae

57. Black drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*  
 58. Ashy drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*  
 59. Bronzed drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*  
 60. Haircrested drongo *Dicrurus hottentotus*

## Family: Sturnidae

61. Common myna *Acridotheres tristis*  
 62. Jungle myna *Acridotheres fuscus*  
 63. Hill myna *Gracula religiosa*

## Family: Corvidae

64. Jay *Garrulus glandarius*  
 65. Blackthroated jay *Garrulus lanceolatus*  
 66. Redbilled blue Magpie *Cissa erythrorhyncha*  
 67. Himalayan tree pie *Dendrocitta formosae*  
 68. House crow *Corvus splendens*  
 69. Jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

## Family: Campephagidae

70. Pied flycatcher shrike *Hemipus picatus*  
 71. Smaller grey cuckoo-shrike *Coracina melaschistos*  
 72. Longtailed minivet *Pendrocatas ethologus*

## Family: Pycnonotidae

73. Whitecheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*  
 74. Redvented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*  
 75. Black bulbul *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*

## Family: Muscicapidae

## Sub Family: Timaliinae

76. Scaubreasted wren babbler *Proscypha albiventer*  
 77. Whitethroated laughing thrush *Garrulax albogularis*  
 78. Striated laughing thrush *Garrulax striatus*  
 79. Streaked laughing thrush *Garrulax lineatus*  
 80. Redheaded laughing thrush *Garrulax erythrocephalus*  
 81. Redwinged shrike babbler *Pteruthius flaviscapula*  
 82. Barthroated siva *Minla strigula*  
 83. Yellownaped yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis*  
 84. Blackcapped sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*

## Sub family: Muscicapinae

85. Sooty flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*  
 86. Rufousbilled flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*  
 87. Little pied flycatcher *Muscicapa westermanni*  
 88. Rufousbellied niltava *Muscicapa sundara*  
 89. Whitebrowed blue flycatcher *Muscicapa superciliosa*  
 90. Verditer flycatcher *Muscicapa thalassina*  
 91. Greyheaded flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*  
 92. Whitethroated fantail flycatcher *Rhipidura albicollis*

## Sub family: Sylviinae

93. Abarant bush warbler *Cettia flavoviridis*  
 94. Spotted bush warbler *Dendropterus thoracicus*

95. Plain leaf warbler *Phylloscopus neglectus*  
 96. Tickell's leaf warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*  
 97. Orangebarred leaf warbler *Phylloscopus pulcher*  
 98. Yellowbrowed leaf warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*  
 99. Greyfaced leaf warbler *Phylloscopus maculipennis*  
 100. Largebilled leaf warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*  
 101. Dull green warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*  
 102. Blackbrowed leaf warbler *Phylloscopus cantator*  
 103. Greyheaded flycatcher warbler *Salicircus xanthocephalus*  
 104. Blackfaced flycatcher warbler *Abroscopus schisticaps*  
 105. Gold crest *Regulus regulus*

## Sub family: Turdinae

106. Blue chat *Enthaicus brunneus*  
 107. Magpie robin *Copsychus saularis*  
 108. Orange flanked bush robin *Enthaicus cyanurus*  
 109. Blueheaded redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*  
 110. Black redstart *P. caeruleus phoenicurusoides*  
 111. Bluefronted redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis*  
 112. Little forficall *Enicurus scouleri*  
 113. Spotted fork-tail *Enicurus maculatus*  
 114. Pied bush chat *Saxicola caprata*  
 115. Desert wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*  
 116. Whitecapped redstart *Chamaea leucocephala*  
 117. Chestnutbellied rock thrush *Monticola rufiventris*  
 118. Blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius*  
 119. Blue whistling thrush *Myiophonus caeruleus*  
 120. Plainbacked mountain thrush *Zosterops mollissima*  
 121. Longtailed mountain thrush *Zosterops dixoni*  
 122. Golden mountain thrush *Zosterops dauma*  
 123. Large brown thrush *Zosterops monticola*  
 124. Tickell's thrush *Turdus unicolor*  
 125. Whitecollared blackbird *Turdus albocinctus*  
 126. Greywinged blackbird *Turdus boulboul*  
 127. Greyheaded thrush *Turdus rubrocanus*  
 128. Blackthroated thrush *Turdus ruficollis atrogularis*  
 129. Mistle thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

## Family: Prunellidae

130. Alpine accentor *Prunella collaris*  
 131. Robin accentor *Prunella rubeculoides*  
 132. Fulvous breasted accentor *Prunella strophista*

## Family: Paridae

133. Grey tit *Parus major*  
 134. Greenbacked tit *Parus monticolus*  
 135. Crested black tit *Parus melanolephus*  
 136. Black tit *Parus rufonuchalis*  
 137. Yellowcheeked tit *Parus xanthogenys*  
 138. Firecapped tit *Cephalopyrus flammiceps*  
 139. Redheaded tit *Aegithalos concinnus*  
 140. Whitethroated tit *Aegithalos niveogularis*

## Family: Sittidae

141. Whitetailed nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*

## Family: Certhiidae

142. Tree creeper *Certhia familiaris*  
 143. Himalayan tree creeper *Certhia himalayana*

## Family: Motacillidae

144. Paddy field pipit *Anthus novaezealandiae*  
 145. Yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava*  
 146. Grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*  
 147. Pied wagtail *Motacilla alba*

## Family: Dicaeidae

148. Firebreasted flowerpecker *Dicaeum ignipectus*





## Family: Nectariniidae

149. Nepal yellowbacked sunbird

*Aethopyga nipalensis*

150. Blackbreasted sunbird

*Aethopyga saturata*

## Family: Zosteropidae

151. White eye

*Zosterops palpebrosa*

## Family: Ploceidae

## Sub family: Passerinae

152. House sparrow

*Passer domesticus*

153. Tree sparrow

*Passer montanus*

154. Cinnamon tree sparrow

*Passer rutilans*

## Sub family: Estrildinae

155. Whitethroated munia

*Lonchura malabarica*

156. Spotted munia

*Lonchura punctulata*

## Family: Fringillidae

## Sub family: Fringillinae

157. Himalayan green finch

*Carduelis spinoides*

158. Hodgson's mountain finch

*Leucosticte nemonicola*

159. Common rose finch

*Carpodacus erythrinus*

160. Pink browed rose finch

*Carpodacus rodochroous*

161. Vinaceous rose finch

*Carpodacus vinaceus*

162. Redmantled rose finch

*Carpodacus rhodochlamys*

163. Brown bullfinch

*Pyrrhula nipalensis*

164. Redheaded bullfinch

*Pyrrhula erythrocephala*

## Family: Emberizidae

165. Rock bunting

*Emberiza cia*

166. Crested bunting

*Malophus lathami*

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## Rare Visits of some Wetland Birds to some Tanks of Dharwad (Karnataka State, India)

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Prof. G.S. KALLUR, Meenasinakai Compound, Station Road, Malarnaddi, Dharwad - 580 007

Prevalence of steady environmental conditions in any area ensures the basic needs of organisms inhabiting that area. Drastic changes in the environment for one reason or other destabilize the organisms therein. This may often result in their untimely exodus in search of better facilities elsewhere. Birds are no exception to this phenomenon. This year's severe summer and total failure of the s.w. monsoon rains in most parts of Karnataka State on the eastern slopes of our western ghats is one such situation that has resulted in completely or nearly completely drying up of numerous tanks in this region. A number of resident wetland bird species might have left their homes seeking better feeding grounds elsewhere. They would have arrived at such places where enough food is available at least temporarily to tide over the unfriendly situation. Against such a background, some wetland bird species arrived at a few tanks of Dharwad, last year, May-July, 2000. Besides them, some more species have appeared in these tanks this year too!

This article reports the arrival of five species of wading birds, viz., i. chestnut bittern *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus* (L.) and great white bellied Heron *Ardea insignis* (H) (Fam: Ardeidae), painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala* (P) (Fam: Ciconiidae), glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* (L) and spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* (L) (Fam: Threskiornithidae) and a swimmer, tufted pochard *Aythya fuligula* (L) (Fam: Anatidae) to a few tanks in and around Dharwad. Earlier surveys of the avifauna have not reported these birds in Dharwad region (Desai et al. 1992-2001, 1999, 2000, and Uttangi, 1985). As their sighting here in Dharwad is the first of its kind, we considered it worth reporting.

The chestnut bittern was confined to the swampy reed bed while the tufted pochard was confined to the shallow waters

of the Langotikere of Jayanagar. Both these were sighted in July 2000. Nine adult great white bellied herons along with four purple herons (2A + 2 Juv.), two grey herons, a median egret and twelve cattle egrets, were sighted in the shallow waters of Nuggikere in June-July months this year. When the same tank was practically dry exposing large mud flats in May, 1996 there was a single glossy ibis along with some common waders. Eight painted storks (all adults) were shuttling between Hosayellapur and Nuggikere tanks in July-August months last year. On the other hand, eight adults along with eight juveniles were seen only in Navalur tank this year. They were also roosting on the treetops. Added to our excitement was the arrival of thirty spoon bills, all adults, to the Navalur tank in May, this year. They were still there even in the month of August. Their plumage clearly indicates that the birds are in a non-breeding phase. They are also found roosting on the treetops along with the painted storks.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

### **SOME INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION ON THE EASTERN WHITE STORK IN WEST BENGAL.**

**DIPANKAR GHOSE, C/O Dr. G.K.Saha, Dept. of Zoology, University of Calcutta, 35 Ballygunge Circle Road, Kolkata 700 019 and SRIKUMAR CHATTOPADHYAY, Scientist SE, In-charge, Wildlife Section, Zoological Survey of India, Pranivigyan Bhavan, 'M' Block, New Alipur, Kolkata**

The eastern white stork *Ciconia boyciana* (Aves: Ciconiiformes: Ciconiidae) has been categorised as an Endangered species in the 2000 IUCN Red List Threatened Species (Hilton-Taylor, 2000). It has also been mentioned that a great deal of habitat destruction along with habitat transformation for human usage can be attributed to this situation. Historical accounts say that this bird is an uncommon winter visitor to the Indian States of Assam and Manipur and also Bangladesh (Ali and Ripley, 1983). In a more recent literature, this bird has been noted as globally threatened (Grimmett *et al.*, 1999). There was no published literature about this bird's occurrence in West Bengal till 1996. In the same year from the popular Indian ornithological journal Newsletter for Birdwatchers we came to know about the occurrence of this bird from a particular place in the south 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. The article was "Eastern White Storks visit West Bengal" by Shri Ananta Mitra. NLBW 36(2): 32. For such a rare species this was indeed a great news (we wish it had been true!). Incidentally we happen to know Mr. Ananta Mitra as we are members of the same Calcutta based NGO. In fact, Mr. Mitra informed us about this wonderful finding and the very next day we visited the site and found that about 120 Asian openbill *Anastomus oscitans* to be present there. They were the same birds that Mr. Mitra referred to. Several other people visited this site, even eminent Scientists from the Zoological Survey of India visited this area to confirm the presence of Endangered eastern white storks, unfortunately to their disappointment, the birds were just Asian Openbills. To our astonishment, we found in the above mentioned issue of NLBW that Mr. Mitra has published an article while misidentifying the birds. Promptly the first author wrote to the NLBW pointing out this mistake. The Editorial Office of NLBW acknowledged the letter, however, they seemed to have a lot of faith on the findings of Mr. Mitra. In the same letter, the Honourable Editor of NLBW said "Shall I send your letter – or contents – to Ananta Mitra for his comments? Do let me know. He also pointed out "it seems difficult to believe that serious birdwatchers would make a mistake about the identification of these birds". The first author replied to that saying that a report of 140 Endangered Birds from a never before site has to be supported by a photograph as these birds are quite large to get them with a simple 200 mm tele lens. Unfortunately, he has not received any communication from the NLBW Editorial Office till date regarding this matter. However, neither his first nor second letter to the Editor, NLBW got published, nor the mistake was rectified or clarified from local authorities. The result, inclusion of the state of West Bengal in the distribution

of eastern stork in recent literature (Grimmett *et al.*, 1999). However, in the latest literature on this field, the mistake was pointed out (Choudhury, 2000) as the said bird were openbills.

Considering all these points, we once again requested the NLBW to rectify the mistake of publishing erroneous information and we are sure that this will undoubtedly improve the face value of this popular journal. For such a large and conspicuous bird having a world population of c. 2500 with a possible decline (Perennou *et al.*, 1994 and Byers *et al.*, 1995) a population of 140 birds, which is about 7% of the global population from a new site definitely claims much attention. Moreover, during the stated period none was recorded from its historical distribution areas within our country (Choudhury, 2000). Thus the document on eastern white stork published in NLBW 36(2): 32 has to be rectified and we strongly recommend an Editorial comment in the next issue of the NLBW.

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**A TRIBUTE TO THE NEWSLETTER.** Dr. J.S. CHHOKAR, Professor and Dean, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad 380 015, India

I have just read the article "Swift Action that Saved the Swifts" by Dr. Satish A. Pande, Vishwas Katdare and Ram Mone in the May-June, 2001 issue of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. I find the action of Pande, Katdare and Mone to be very impressive.

While publishing it in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* and awarding them the William Selover grant for 500 Dollars are both very worthwhile. I think this incident deserves wider dissemination, and for two reasons. One, I think this is likely to inspire and motivate some more people to get involved in conservation activity. Two, and more importantly, this is an unusual incident not only because something worthwhile was achieved by the alertness of the gentlemen but also because the government authorities, in the form of the Forest Department and the Coast Guard, did admirable work. This makes it even more unusual particularly in these days when there is a lot of cynicism about government agencies.

I am not sure how this wider dissemination can or should be done. I am willing to do a brief write-up to be sent to the national newspapers with the hope that they will publish it. This of course would have to be acceptable to Pande, Katdare and Mone, and also to the *Newsletter*.



There is one more reason why I was attracted by this incident. I had read a newspaper article during my recent trip to Japan, about Swiftlet nests being poached in large numbers in East Asian countries resulting in a depletion of their population. The news that the similar thing was happening in India was very disturbing indeed.



**PELAGIC BIRDS ON MUMBAI SHORES.** ANISH P. ANDHERIA, 2, Sagar Building, V.P. Road, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 058

This monsoon (2001), the bird-watchers of Mumbai and thereabout have been treated with some extremely significant sightings. During the third week of July, a lesser frigate bird *Fregata ariel* was sighted by Rishad Naoraji near Colaba (Southernmost tip of Mumbai). Subsequently, two birds were sighted by many birders along the Marine Lines sea face (more famously known as the Queen's Necklace) for the next one week. Four more birds were seen by Sunjoy Monga over "Madh Island" near Malad (Northern shoreline of Mumbai).

Meanwhile, an equally exciting news regarding the sighting of a masked booby, *Sula dactylatra* came in from Kihim. Mr. Vaseem Moizudeen collected a bird from its shores on 21<sup>st</sup> July. The bird was in critical condition and couldn't make it to the next morning. Although it was unfortunate that the bird couldn't be revived, the fact that it was identified and reported helped us to further our knowledge about the range of these rare visitors.

The masked booby is known to breed in the Maldives and Lakshadweep (Grimmett et al., 1999) and has been consistently reported from the coasts of Karnataka and Kerala. However, comparatively fewer records are available from the northwestern coastline. On the other hand, the lesser frigate bird, also known to breed in Maldives (Grimmett et al., 1999), has been sighted more often along Mumbai's coastline. Nevertheless, never have the birds stayed close to the mainland for so long.

The sudden spurt of sightings of pelagic birds from the Mumbai region could be attributed to the straying of these birds from their usual course due to the rough weather over the oceans during monsoon. In other words, strong oceanic winds have blown these birds towards the mainland.

Whatever may be the reason the arrival of these birds in Mumbai was celebrated as a festival by both the professional as well as amateur bird-watchers. For some veterans, it was only their second sighting in two decades while for the younger generation it was a "once-in-a-lifetime experience" — an experience, they will cherish for years to come!

Finally, I would like to comment on the efficiency of the "Internet" in disseminating information. The "birds of bombay" discussion group, of which there are over 300 members, serves as a nodal point for the exchange of birding experiences and conservation ideas just at a click of a button. If not for the

rapidity of this amazing facility, these magnificent birds would have gone unnoticed.

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**FEEDING A YOUNG CUCKOO – THE ASTONISHING BEHAVIOUR OF BABBLERS.** ASHOK KUMAR, M., SHARAVANAN, K. and THIYAGESAN, K., PG and Research Dept. of Wildlife Biology and Zoology, A.V.C. College, Mannampandal 609 305

"Birds of the same feather flock together". But, now a flock of babbler proves this. It is interesting to report a rare, amazing sighting of a babbler (*Turdoides caudatus*) feeding a young Indian cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus*). This was first observed on the eve of 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2000 in the A.V.C. College campus, Mannampandal, Mayiladuthurai, Taminadu (Lat. 11° 08'N, Long. 79° 4'E) and the feeding behaviour continues even now i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> December 2000. We heard the long begging call of fledgling keechng..... keechng..... keechng..... keechng..... keechng..... and located the young cuckoo on the branch of a neem tree, all alone. A flock of babblers numbering five was foraging on the ground. We could not believe our eyes when we saw one among the flock sitting very close and feeding the young cuckoo by regurgitation. The food may be insects or worm. While the babbler was feeding the young cuckoo it wagged its tail and feathers, and made continuous, short begging sound like keechng... keechng... keechng...keechng. After 10 minutes another babbler of the flock came and fed the young. After some time, the babbler flock moved to another place of the campus and the young cuckoo followed them. Two babblers of the flock fed the young cuckoo every 10 minutes for the whole day. The other members of the flock did not feed the young. Several authors noticed a well-known association between various species of birds for mutual benefit. Salim Ali (1946) observed a racket-tailed drongo shadowing a pair of tree pies. Johnson et al., (1979-80) noticed a mutually beneficial association between a black drongo and white-headed babblers aerially hawking insects. Nevertheless, the association between a young cuckoo and a common babbler for one sided benefit was not noticed except by Eldhose (2000) who has observed the black headed oriole feeding a young Indian cuckoo. When thinking about it, a question arises i.e., whether by this parasitic behaviour of the cuckoo, the hatching success and fledgling success of the babblers were affected or not? This question remains unanswered.



**BIRDS AT TIGER HILL, CONOOR.** M.G. MUTHANNA, No. 19, Cubbon road, Bangalore - 560 001

Conoor in the Nilgiris is at an average elevation of 5,500 feet and is a delightful hill station with a temperate and pleasant climate all the year around.



Tiger hill is one of the hill features facing due south, looking onto the plains of Mettupalayam / Coimbatore and where we were staying.

It was the month of June and you see the most unusual cloud formations along with 180-degree view rainbows. Connor mainly gets the North-East monsoon. The weather in June is thus generally pleasant with light drizzles, which may spill over from the South-West, while at Ooty it is damp, grey and quite cold. We were virtually living in a Tea Estate with tea bushes all around and with a delightful garden, which had a nice bird-bath, which was used nearly throughout the day by the birds in the vicinity.

The dominant bird song we heard throughout our stay was the blackbird with its lovely lilting tunes, outbeating even the magpie-robin, which was also a frequent visitor as were also the passing flights of roseringed parakeets – with their screeching calls. We saw many white spotted fantail flycatchers. They are always a pleasure to watch flitting around in the garden, having a sand bath and spreading out their fantails with their wings half spread and occasionally chasing an insect and finally drinking water in the birdbath before moving on.

Surprisingly, there were many little brown doves, their soothing coo-ing is always a pleasure to hear. In the late afternoon there used to be quite a congregation of doves on the electric wires outside the house.

Some early mornings we could hear the malabar whistling thrush, its schoolboy whistle from sholas nearby, piercing through the morning cloud and mist.

A family of rufous bellied babblers always kept us amused whenever someone entered the area where they were, they used to scatter in all directions with a lot of noise of titting calls and scampering off sometimes into a denser thicket to return and continue searching for food among the bushes and overturning fallen leaves.

Every morning at a given time a pair of small yellownaped wood peckers would perch on the peach tree nearby and one of them would sit on the nearby electric pole and peck away at a wooden fuse box on it. The black backed woodpecker we often saw on our walks was pecking at the dry branches of silver oak trees.

The noisy black bulbuls could not be missed as they were virtually around most of the mornings and evenings and were the noisiest of all the birds we came across.

The jungle myna was another bird I was happy to see as it was a long time since I have seen them, busy looking for food near the wooded area and occasionally on the fringes of the garden. Also nice to see were sparrows which I have not seen in Bangalore for a while.

The busy small flower peckers were a pretty sight, glistering in the morning sunlight - flitting from flower to flower in the lovely hill station garden, which was so well laid out with all its colourful flowers which we don't see in the plains. The Nilgiri

flower pecker male and female look alike with light green wings and a whitish underside with a yellowish tinge. Another sighting which we used to look forward to, were the painted bush quail which used to dart in and out of the forested area on to the tea garden walking path and when frightened these birds used to fly off at low level, with a low whistling sound, dispersing in different directions.

After a shower of rain the sky was full of brown-throated swifts these fast flying birds used to dart down on winged and other insects coming out from their flooded burrows in the ground. There were many nightjars which caught the headlights of our car while returning at night and one cannot easily forget the fairly loud and resounding single calls of this long tailed nightjar in the silent dark nights. The calls of each bird lasted close to a minute.

When daybreak came we were homeward bound via Ooty ; and the steep Sigur ghat, which must easily be the steepest commonly used ghat in the country. You go down from nearly 8000 feet to 3500 feet in all of 36 hairpin bends and 40 minutes, coming into the lush green sanctuaries of Mudumalai and Bandipur, where the bird life changed dramatically from the hills of Coonoor.

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**ACCOMMODATION IN THATTEKKAD BIRD SANCTUARY.**  
MOTTY J. MATHEW, A16/29, East, Trinity Acres, Sarjapura Road, Koramangala, Bangalore 560 031

This is to bring to your kind attention that in Kerala, just across the Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary on the Western Ghats, I've started a home stay accommodation for serious birdwatchers. Till now the accommodation available at Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary was sub-standard, hence it was neglected and unexplored.

I hope through your Newsletter, birdwatchers will come to know and use our facility. We have converted our house for this purpose. We have 3 bedrooms with all the basic facilities. For further details contact us at Thattekkad : on Phone No : 0485-570411, 9847109917 – Bangalore : 080-5720517, 5730475, or E-mail us at <palamattamhouse@hotmail.com>

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**MORE NEWS ON PITTAS, Dr. SATISH A. PANDE,**  
C-9, Bhosale Park, Sahakar Nagar, No.2, Pune – 411 009

Thank you for your letter. I was happy to read the letter from the then Dean & Head, IIM, Ahmedabad. I have sent him an answer and have apprised Shri Katdare & Mond about the same.

In continuation of my earlier note on *Pitta brachyura*, two more nests have been located, this time in the north kokan in Raigud Dist. Both nests are on teak at the heights of 10 ft. & 14 ft. On one the pitta was incubating, and the other was still constructing the nest. The place is near Mangao and the time



was and June, early July. The nests were brought to my notice by Shri Sagar Mestri.

1. <i>Tectona grandis</i>	10 ft.	Incubation	June end	Raigud dist.	Sagar Mestri
2. <i>Tectona grandis</i>	14 ft.	Nest building	July 1 <sup>st</sup> week.	Raigud dist.	Sagar Mestri

If possible these observations may kindly be added to the earlier note. This indicates the increased range documentation. Interestingly my friend Sanjay Shengaonkar, informed me that he has recently recorded 22 active nests of the pitta in a forest near Chandrapur. This is a fantastic news.

I also received a kind and an encouraging letter from Thakur Dalip Singh after he read the Swiftlet article in the NLBW. There are a few more letters that have come from all over Maharashtra. Thanks to the NLBW & to you.

We have received letters from Shri T. R. Balu, Hon'ble Cabinet Minister for Environment and from Smt. Maneka Gandhi. They say that the matter has reached them. The latter has advised me to file a PIL in the High Court. What do you think? Kindly advise.

\* \* \*

**NOTES ON SHIKRAS AND SMALL GREEN BARBETS.**  
NIRANJAN R. SANT, 27, Adarsh Nagar, Vadgaon, Belgaum 590 005, Karnataka

**Shikra [*Accipiter badius*] feeding on fruit bat.**  
On the afternoon of 22 May 2001, I saw a female shikra carrying some black coloured prey. On noticing this I immediately stopped to have a closer look and to my surprise, she had caught a bat. After some struggle the shikra severed the bat's head and then she flew away with the kill to a near by tree and I lost track of her.

I suspected that she must be having a nest somewhere nearby. I returned to the spot on the next day and waited near the same tree and tried to listen to the alarm calls of bulbuls, mynas and birds, usually uttered when a bird of prey is near by. I heard the alarm calls at 4.15 pm and within a few minutes the male shikra appeared near the same branch with a bird in its talons where the female was seen on the previous day. A closer look revealed that it was a jungle myna. I was ready with my binocular and camera. I followed the bird and to my delight there was a nest on a neem tree 25 feet from the ground. The nest had three almost full grown chicks.

On 1st June, I saw the female shikra bringing a fruit bat to the nest. This time the shikra had already removed the head of the bat and I heard hungry chicks squabbling and fighting for the tiny morsels. After a few minutes I saw the female taking away the remaining parts of the bat such as wings, claws and big bones which the chicks could not swallow. Possibly the female was ensuring that the chicks were not harming themselves while trying to devour the sharp claws of the bat.

I observed this nest for two more weeks and saw the parents bringing bats, garden lizards, bulbuls, mynas, and sparrows.

Once the shikra brought a chick of a pigeon, probably two weeks old, to the nest. Many times the prey could not be identified as it was brought to the nest all dressed up. Feeding times were usually between 10 and 11 in the morning, and between 3 and 6 in the evening. Bat kills were observed on two occasions during the three weeks observation. Both the bats were usually killed during the evenings.

The parents used to sit near the nest for a long time during the afternoons and call each other, and often the chicks also participated in the chorus. Both the parents used to go out for hunting at around 3.00pm.

The male never brought the prey to the nest. He used to sit with the prey on his favourite perch, and utter low calls and the female used to arrive and snatch the prey from him.

In two weeks time the chicks had grown considerably. I couldn't keep a watch on the nest and after eight days when I went to see the nest, it was empty.

**Some observations on small green barbets [*Megalaima viridis*] nesting.**

My home town Belgaum is still quite wooded and there are plenty of fruit bearing trees around. Understandably, the barbet population is also quite large with both the copper-smith [*Megalaima haemacephala*] and the small green barbet [*Megalaima viridis*]. The small green barbets were quite vocal, during the summer months and probably their nesting season had begun. I kept a watch on barbets' nesting activities and the digging started around the second week of February. By March end I had located around 13 nests. the most favoured tree was the rain tree. Out of the 13 nests 5 were in rain trees, 4 were in ficus trees, 2 were in spathodeas, 2 were in drumstick trees. I kept a close watch on these nests on day to day basis. After the completion of the nest the birds visited the nest holes every day to give finishing touches. In April the visits became irregular and the calls were also reduced considerably.

By May only one nest made in a shevaga tree was active. By 18 June the chicks had hatched and the parents had started feeding the chicks inside the nest. I was unable to record the actual date of egg laying. The chicks left the nest on 13 July. There were two chicks.

The remaining 12 nests are empty till today. I do not know the reason for the failure of these nests. Can the readers suggest the reasons for this failure?

\* \* \*

**COMMENTS ON THE NEWSLETTER.** AAMIR ALI, La Residence, Apt. 30, 1938 Champex.

It's always a pleasure to see oneself in print and I was glad, of course, to see my review of the Threatened Birds. Also pleased that you added the list of endangered birds in India; I'm sure that this will be helpful.

But apart from this, I was once again impressed by the high standard that the NL has achieved. Your editorials are always



most readable. I liked the Swift action piece: I remember very clearly when Salim and Osho – early 40s? – went to Vengurla to study this nesting site. I also thought the article about the Bengal Florican and that about the Rosy Pastor (I remember Salim pointing out flocks of these at Juhu) were most interesting. The extracts from Osmaston's diary were great – but alas, you don't give a date.

The letters from Kiran K. and Uruf Shahid were delightfully touching. Not to mention Zai's Nightjar.

One thing about the review of Threatened Birds. I seem to remember that the publishers had specially asked that we inform readers of how and from where they could buy copies; also, that there was a special price offered. I am up in Champex so cannot check this, but if this has got inadvertently left out, perhaps we should include it in the next issue?



**BLACKHEADED MUNIAS IN BAREILLY.** S. S. MAHESH, Flying Officer, Air Traffic Controlling Officer, Air Force Station, Bareilly – 243 002 U.P.

I have had an opportunity to observe blackheaded munias but I am a little confused about its racial identity. Two blackheaded munias (*Lonchura malacca*) were spotted in a reed of elephant grass at Air Force Station, Bareilly, on 28 July 2001. The weather was humid and hot as the birds were perched on a barbed wire fence, preening themselves exposed to sunlight. The upper belly and sides were strikingly white like in *Lonchura malacca malacca*. The tail, rump, back, scapulars and wing were bright orange in colour, and under tail coverts were deep reddish brown – a distinct combination of its own. The museum diagnosis by K.C. Parkes as mentioned in Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan, describes *Lonchura malacca atricapilla* as, upper parts paler reddish brown, rump golden yellow to orange, and retrices deep reddish brown. *Lonchura malacca rubroniger* is the third race of the species and has chestnut upper belly and sides, like *Lonchura malacca atricapilla*. The distribution map of blackheaded munia doesn't include regions as east as Bareilly, and moreover the whitebellied race is confined to peninsular India.

The records of stray occurrence of *Lonchura malacca malacca* in Durgapur 1970 and Gujarat in 1983 are believed to be the escapees of caged birds. Which blackheaded munia was at Bareilly?



**BIRDS IN SARISKA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY LOCATED IN RAJASTHAN – NEAR ALWAR.** Dr. A. K. GUPTA, 4710857, B - 9 Lohia Market, Ghaziabad.

On March 4, 2001, I proceeded with three of my friends to the Sariska Wildlife Sanctuary located in Rajasthan.

On our way I was fascinated by camels and camel carts. The hair on the camel's neck and belly were cut in a style which gives prominence to the necks and other parts of the body.

Nearing Alwar town I noticed a pair of peculiar birds sitting on a mud boundary wall of a kutchra house, one of them had its tail feathers fanned out as a Laka pigeon. Their faces were away from us – approx. 70 meters from us. I opened the books and guessed them to be either houbara or lesser florican. I watched only from a moving car as we were late, and I thought that we should find more such birds. We went on but it never happened. The black colour of the neck and crest on the head were not visible in the case of the presumed florican. The size and colour matched that of a houbara. Could it be houbara?

Our main objective was to spot a tiger or a leopard. We had hired a Gypsy, driven by Mr. Mauzi Ram, one of the most senior fellows there. He had no knowledge of birds but could trail tigers. Pug marks were excellent. We were after the tiger but the tiger didn't think it worthwhile to be visible to us.

In despair – a rarest possible incident happened. Mauzi Ram took us to Kali Ghati Forest Check Post, to enquire from forest guards regarding the movement of tigers. I also got down to have first hand information. The remaining three in the open Gypsy took potato wafers to pass the time. Wild tree pies came down and took the potato wafers from their hands. They called me in a thrilling voice – I was awestruck to see it. I took some wafers and the tree pies came and sat on my palms and ate the wafers. In the meantime as I was standing on the road, a wild peacock (full grown adult male) came from somewhere on to the road and approached me. Our guide Mauzi Ram encouraged the peacock "Moti come – Moti come". I sat down in a squatting posture with the wafers in my right palm. The peacock ate from my hand. When I tried to touch the peacock it moved to the side without removing its beak from my palm. Unfortunately our camera had been left in the room but other tourists, especially foreigners, took various photographs of this scene.

Later on, on my enquiry, I was told that because of the friendly behaviour of the forest guards at Kali Ghati Check Post, these birds, including the peacock, had become fearless of human beings and they came close to all tourists.

Besides houbara on the way I saw black bulbul (*Hypsipetes madagascariensis*). For me it has been an important event.

On our return journey we visited a lake "Silly Sade" at Alwar and saw large groups of ducks and geese – could be about 2000 birds. We also saw a flock of 38 spoonbills.

Conditions at Sariska

1) Scarcity of water is probably the biggest problem. Few water holes, most of them less than 10 meters in diameter, are shallow and have dirty water. They are man made and are being filled by a pipeline connected to a tube well. The natural nullah had only riverstones without water. What will happen in June? All trees and shrubs indicate shortage of water.

There is an urgent need for proper drinking water management in the Sanctuary. I feel that bigger water



holes - 30 meters x 50 meters, brick paved with surrounding stone zone of 4-5 meters be constructed and the natural nullah be connected to some river or canal.

- 2) There is no Machan - a few machans should be constructed.
- 3) A larger number and longer trails for Gypsies be constructed.
- 4) Some facility for a night stay inside the park be developed.
- 5) Villages inside the park should be shifted so that the villagers do not disturb the animals while going to their houses through the sanctuary.

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**VULTURES IN ABUNDANCE — HARD TO BELIEVE.**  
G.S. PADATE, SAPNA S. and V. ZALA, Department of Zoology, Faculty of Science, M.S. University of Baroda, Vadodara - 390 002, Gujarat.

The Book of Indian birds by Salim Ali (1979) describes the whitebacked or Bengal vulture, *Gyps bengalensis* (Gmelin) as 'our commonest vulture'. But it is an irony that these huge scavengers, which were seen as large gatherings in the countryside and the open skies are now on the verge of being erased out. In the midst of such despairing reports, it was quite a pleasant surprise for us to watch the pride of the skies circling magnificently in the afternoon hours on the 25<sup>th</sup> June 2001. The earlier sighting was done on the Panchmahal hill ranges near Bodeli (10 kms east from Bodeli town). Initially 40 vultures were counted and as the huge birds gently soared and rose with the thermals, magically the number also seemed to increase. The total count finally came to 63. It was a feast for our eyes!

After a couple of months, on our way to Chhota-Udepur, near the banks of the Orsang river (about 12 kms west from Chhota-Udepur town), on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, the familiar sight of vultures gliding effortlessly in the afternoon time at 14:30hrs was a treat once again. There were 50 Indian white-backed vultures circling with the thermals.

Could this be the same flock observed near Bodeli or is it another flock was the question that were in our minds. If it was so then the dwindling species in such a number is a delightful sign. There are plans by the Wildlife Circle, Baroda to carry out first-ever census of the vultures (Times of India-12<sup>th</sup> September, 2001, Ahmedabad Edition). Regular count and further monitoring of the embodiment of grace of the Indian skies is definitely the need of the hour for the conservation of the Indian white backed vulture.

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**NESTING OF INDIAN PITTA (PITTA BRACHYURA) RECORDED FIRST TIME IN VIDHARBHA.**  
ATUL DHAMANKAR, Near Patel high school, Shivaji Sq., Chandrapur 442 402.

The nesting of Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*) was recorded at Junona, a small village about seven kms from Chandrapur, Maharashtra. In two sq.kms were found 22 nests of the Indian Pitta. All nests were found during July and August. They were on a height between 8 to 55 ft. Some studies on the nesting behaviour of Pittas were also carried out. I found both the parents feeding the chicks. The chicks took 12 to 13 days to leave the nest. This is the first record of breeding of Pittas from this area and I have taken some photographs. Pittas prefer nesting in dense forest. Amla, Silk cotton, Mahua and Teak trees are their favourite nesting sites. Nests are made from the thin leaves and lined with grass.

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**'UPPALAPADU TANK' YET TO BE DECLARED AS A BIRD SANCTUARY** by K. MRUTHYUMJAYA RAO, 2/35/15, Neelimala Vari Street, Ferrajupeta, Kakinada - 533 003

This year the pelicans arrived during 1st week October itself. Last year they had arrived during the last week of November. I took a count on 10<sup>th</sup> October and there were around 60 pelicans and I noticed courtship and mating activities. There were 1200 white ibis and chicks were noticed in most of the nests. I also counted around 7000 open billed storks with 600 active nests, 2500 glossy ibis and 250 little cormorants in the heronry.

The authorities have sanctioned a new channel to bring water to the Uppalapadu village, by-passing the Uppalapadu tank. But as on date the scheme remains on paper and the villagers are reluctant to utilize the Uppalapadu tank water, which is contaminated by the bird droppings. Many villagers feel that this heronry is a nuisance. The water scheme and other conservation measures are crucial for the long time survival of the heronry. Please write to the Chief minister of Andhra Pradesh and the PCCF(Wildlife), Government of Andhra Pradesh, Aranya Bhavan, Saifabad, Hyderabad, for immediate action. I request birdwatchers to email to The Environment Minister <mef@menf.delhi.nic.in> and write letters to Shri. S.C. Sharma Addl. IGF, MOEF, Paryavaran Bhavan, CGO Complex, Lodi Estate, New Delhi - 110 003

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Cover: **Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)** is a pigeon sized black and brown bird, with a slightly upcurved beak and coral red eyes. It is a rare winter visitor from Western Europe, seen only in North Western India during winter. The picture was taken in a salt pan near Dwaraka, Gujarat in November 1996. The birds were swimming in a pond of impounded water, close to the road. They were not shy at all. The flock seemed to be sitting so lightly on the water surface like a little buoyant; totilla and nonchalantly riding the small waves created by the winds.

Photo: S. Theodore Baskaran



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- ☐ Dangers of Kite flying, by Anish P. Andheria
- ☐ Rufoustailed Flycatcher in Hyderabad, by Aashesh Fittie & Rajeev Mathew
- ☐ Rat Snake eats Crow Pheasant Nestling, by S.Sivakumar & S.Saravanan
- ☐ Inspiration of Birds, by Arunayan Sharma
- ☐ House martin ringing, by L.A. Hill

**Crows Terrorizing Tokyo**

In a report of the International Herald Tribune (13, June 2001) 30,000 tree loving jungle crow species of Tokyo are not just a nuisance which they are in Indian cities, but are proving a danger to the human population. "Mothers gather up their children when the flocks roost overhead." Why has this happened? Why have they become so brazen and increasingly unafraid of contact with man and beast? Michio Matsuda, an ornithologist, explains why. "There is a lack of communication here. Crows send many signals. When the salary man going to work, or when a mother with a baby goes under a tree with a nest, the crows give many cries to say: please leave our living circle. The city people miss the sign. It's a problem for the crows. They are perplexed and send more signals that are ignored. The only thing they can do is to be more aggressive".

An exterminator was hired by the city government, and in May last year 250 nests were dismantled, and in the process 642 chicks and 93 eggs were destroyed. The writer argues that the increasing quantity of food now being thrown into refuse bins by the Japanese who have lost their "famous frugality" is the cause of the increase in crow population. As against the population of 30,000 today, there were only 7000 in Tokyo in 1985.

What should we do in India apart from what we are attempting to do in the way of better garbage management? Destroying crows nest is the answer, but if we appoint exterminators we will have to provide them with steel helmets and appropriate armour to withstand the attacks which will follow - not only from the owner of the nest but from all their near and distant relations. The community feeling among crows and their communication network is extraordinarily efficient.

**Poisonous birds**

This is a new discovery. A researcher from the University of Chicago in New Guinea, flexed a wound caused by a scratch by a *hooded pitohui* and his mouth grew "numb and tingly". He wondered why. He sent feathers, skin and other tissues to the National Institute of Health. They identified and extracted a poison and when this was injected into mice "the mice looked over". The fact that birds can be poisonous is a new discovery for ornithologists.

**The Birds of Kudremukh**

In their article in the previous issue and concluded in the current one, Ameen Ahmed and Harish Bhat have given us an idea of the natural wealth of the Kudremukh area. Ameen Ahmed is largely responsible as the representative of the Wildlife Aware Nature Club of Tumkur for filing a Public Interest Litigation against the State of Karnataka, the Government of India, and the Kudremukh Iron and Steel Co. Ltd. for continuing with mining operations in this ecologically fragile area. The Writ Petition has been admitted in the High Court of Karnataka, for which we have to thank Advocate Shri Ravivarma Kumar



who is well known for having supported deserving environmental causes in the past (For example against the Taj Group of Cos. who wanted to set up a hotel within the Nagarhole National Park). The petition records that Kudremukh is the home of 42 species of mammals, 169 species of birds, 34 species of amphibians and 54 reptiles. As Peter Scott once said "It is their world, too" and I hope this basic fact will be kept in mind when the final decision is taken.

### Nagzira Study Project

Kiran Vasant Purandare has sent a copy of an impressive project which involves "365 days in the heart of the forest". In his covering explanatory letter he says he will be looking at all facts of nature and will keep meticulous records with the help of his camera. He will be capturing various events happening in the Sanctuary all round the year. He has been offered full cooperation by the Forest Department which is of course essential. I think it is true to say (and a rather encouraging fact) that the Forest Department is now much more friendly to non-officials than it was a few decades ago. 40 years ago when I was in Nagzira the Forester in charge was anxious to kill all the wild dogs because according to him they were responsible for the killing of many tigers. My attempts to dissuade him were not successful, and he was over-critical of bodies like WWF which I represented. I am sure Purandare will be more welcome than I was, and in partnership with the Forest Department will probably produce a valuable report. Those of you who wish to know more about the project, or assist him financially could write to him at : 62/ A, Prashant Pradawane Gaothan, Near Ravindra Mhatre Bridge, Pune 411 004.

### Tampering with Nature

In the previous issue of the Newsletter, while describing an experiment carried out on warblers I suggested that some of our readers may like to air their views about the desirability or otherwise of interfering with natural events. I reproduce some of the letters which have come in. Some have said rightly that without knowing all the facts of this particular case they were unable to give a satisfactory reply. While on this subject I would like to draw your attention to the article in this issue about the assistance provided to the nestling whistling ducks by B. Narayan Deb at Rajbari. I look forward to more news about subsequent broods of whistlers and their fate.

### International Ornithological Congress

I had the good fortune of meeting Dr. Mrs. Dominique Homberger, the new Secretary of the International Ornithological Committee when she visited Bangalore last year. She is genuinely interested in encouraging ornithology in India and was anxious to ensure that a sizeable number of Indians attend the next Congress in Beijing in August 2002. In her letter of September 23rd, 2001, she writes: "I hope that we will be able to envisage the 2014 IOC in India, but so far nothing concrete has emerged in this direction. In order for an

IOC to be hosted by India, it will be of paramount importance that the various ornithological societies of India (and, if at all possible, also any other South Asian ornithological societies, such as those of Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) organize themselves into an umbrella organization. Only an umbrella organization would be able to draw upon sufficient personnel and financial resources to host an IOC. The creation of such an umbrella organization will require extensive efforts of some forward-looking and committed individuals who can convince the widely dispersed Indian community of ornithologists and bird-watchers of the need for collaboration and unity in purpose".

"Another point that would be most important in view of a possible Indian IOC in 2014 would be to convince as many ornithologists and bird-watchers as possible to attend the IOC in Beijing next August. The congress participants would be able to see for themselves what is involved in the preparation of an IOC and would also be able to network with international colleagues. Such collegial networks are very useful for information and support in complex enterprises, such as organizing an international congress. I realize that the current times are not the best in terms of funding for international travels; however, I cannot overemphasize the importance of attending as many IOCs as possible prior to issuing an invitation to host an IOC".

The present is not the best time to think about international travel, but let us hope that the atmosphere will cool down soon, without getting any hotter. Many of our readers are now ornithologists of international standing, and some have the financial resources and the administrative ability to think of an "umbrella organization" of the kind to which Mrs. Homberger refers. Some of you may wish to contact her, for inspiration and advice. Her address : Secretary, International Ornithological Committee, Professor of Zoology, Department of Biological Sciences, 500 Life Sciences Building, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-1715, Phone (225) 578-1747. Email: <zodhomb@lsu.edu>

### Thomas Gay

Readers may remember some very well written and enjoyable articles by Thomas Gay. A member of the former Indian Civil Service (ICS) also known as the Indian Celestial Service for the power it enjoyed, Tom was annoyed with me once for having addressed a letter with the suffix IAS (Retd). He died in Pune recently at the age of 98, and his son Hugh Waterfield who came down for the funeral from Wales sent me a letter which indicates his exceptional interest in birds and in the natural environment: I quote "... At nearly 68 I have so much physical work on our 33 acre estate in Wales, that I inevitably keep quite fit. I am a compulsive planter of trees (about 900-1000 per year) and record birds for the RSPB & BTO. We now have detailed records for about eleven years, and 91 bird species in the list. An increase in open water is my next target—to help waders, of course, but also fish and invertebrates." The Newsletter looks forward to his contributions.



AMEEN AHMED, Wildlife Aware Nature Club, Ghucose Buildings, Horpet Main Road, Tumkur 572 101, and  
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(Continued from last issue...)

After sighting an orange-headed ground thrush (*Zosterops citrina*) near a cave known as 'Pilipanjara', meaning Tiger's cave in local language, we continued along the narrow leaf covered forest path. We saw a beautiful Malabar trogon and witnessed a strange behaviour of this bird, which Ameen was fortunately able to capture on his video camera. The bird had a small white feather in its beak, the same colour as that of its breast, which it consumed leisurely. To us, the reason for this was as mysterious as the forest itself. Walking for a few minutes, we reached the edge of a rubber plantation. Continuing to walk for 5 minutes along the boundary of the rubber plantation that separated the plantation from the forest, we were again in the forest and the path curved towards the north.

Even though the time was past nine and the weather quite sunny, we were able to come across many birds. The calls of magpie robins and malabar whistling thrushes (*Myiophonus horsfieldii*) melodiously broke the otherwise silent walk at regular intervals. We could sight a Loten's sunbird (*Nectarinia lotenia*) and an unidentified warbler and amidst the dense canopy a pair of common ioras (*Aegithina tiphia*). As we again descended towards Neriya stream, we came across a flock of scarlet minivets. The bright yellow of the females being followed by the fluorescent orange of the male, shone brightly in the sun. We reached the Neriya stream and to our south, on the other bank were big plantations mixed with forested tracts. The area around Neriya village is the stronghold of the Hebbar family, known as the Neriya Hobbars. Together they own thousands of hectares of plantations and most importantly hundreds of acres of prime forest. Their decisions will have a major impact on the conservation of this stretch of forest. Along with the forests of Karnataka Forest Department, these private forests form a crucial link in this narrow stretch of the Western Ghats.

We now had to descend the steep foothills to reach the lowland and mid-elevation evergreen forests and we had to cross the small Neriya valley and then walk through private rubber plantations of the Hebbar family. The border of the opposite bank of Neriya stream is lined by tall coconut trees, beyond which are paddy and arecanut plantations. Amidst the coconut trees, we could hear many hill mynas (*Gracula religiosa*). Occasionally flocks of them would burst into flight and land on the Peepal tree at the edge of the stream, their typical whistling calls reverberating in the tranquil valley below. Unmindful of all this, a few redvented bulbuls (*Pycnonotus cafer*) were feeding on lantana berries. We began to climb ahead. Along the un-metalled track dividing the forests and plantations, were the survey stones of MBPL. Climbing for a few minutes, we could enjoy a clear view of the forest-clothed

## Birding in a Vanishing Forest

Western Ghat chain. To our east were the tall hills of Feechkallu betta. To our south, dense reserve forests by which it derives its name, surrounded the Amedikallu peak. At a particular place beside the path, the Neriya stream formed a small, beautiful rapid, which we selected to satisfy our hunger before embarking on the punishing trek ahead. We did so, watching little cormorants, smaller/median egrets (*Egretta intermedia*), pond herons (*Ardeola grayii*) and a solitary large egret (*Ardea alba*) all searching for their own breakfast in the stream.

After breakfast, we trudged along the path and just at the foothill of a steep elevation on the stream bank, we could see mud paddling by common emigrant, common mormon and common crow butterflies. To enter the evergreen forests to our north, we had to walk east for a few kilometers along the Neriya rubber estate track parallel to Neriya stream. The bird activity was not very exciting in the rubber plantation. We came across a lone shikra (*Accipiter badius*) amidst the rubber trees. A red spurfowl (*Gallus padicea*), which was feeding at the edge of dense undergrowth of the evergreen forest bordering the estate, ran back into the jungle upon watching us. On the lookout for tree insects, a lone lesser golden backed woodpecker (*Dinopium banghalense*) shuttled between the rubber trees. As we approached a small rubber-processing factory within the estate, Guru came across a hornbill, which again flew into the forest towards the North. We were not able to distinguish the exact species of this hornbill. The next one kilometer walk was uneventful. Ismail said it was not possible to climb the peaks ahead and at the same time get back to our base camp by dusk. We heeded his words and turned back.

Descending down the slope to where we had our breakfast in the morning, we agreed unanimously to beat the heat by having a swim in the crystal clear waters. A refreshing bath following a hard trek made us devour every morsel in the leaf packed lunch, in the shade, while our clothes dried on the boulders of the river bank. As we had to reach Guruvanakere town early from where we had to catch our bus back to Bangalore, we decided to walk at a brisk pace. Getting back along the stream, we could see a lone unidentified sandpiper, a stork billed kingfisher (*Pelargopsis capensis*), and a couple of little cormorants. Also, the calls of hill mynas could be heard on the same trees bordering the paddy field on the other bank. Reaching Neriya by 4:30 pm we found that the vehicle that was supposed to take us back to Guruvanakere, had not yet come. The view from the village was fascinating, with the chain of Western Ghats running like a wall from north to south. The setting sun heralded our approaching jeep and we hit the road pondering for how long this spectacular stretch of country could withstand the onslaught of development.





**The Setting:** I live within the high-walled premises of a four-acre compound in Abhayapuri, Bongaigaon district, West Assam, in two ridge-roofed "Assam-type" houses. The premises are quiet and have many old trees and bushes in it attracting bulbul, magpie robin, myna, barbet, woodpecker, sunbird, thrush, babbler and so on and a few small animals such as monitor lizard, snakes, mongoose and occasional civet. Over one of my houses a Sandwich Island Creeper drapes much of the roof providing colour and respite from the sun. In the rainy season it is a common sight to see pairs of lesser whistling teal fly overhead circle about and head-off to nest wherever they do beyond the town.

**The Visit:** In May-end, one pair of teals did not head off but checked out the creeper-covered roof as a possible nest-site. They made several brief landings over days. They seemed to have liked the place and checked us out too, watching our movements and reactions. They seemed finally to have settled down to nest. We could not make out from below when the laying had finished and the incubation begun. We noticed that often both birds would land and after a few minutes one of them would fly off. It was more usual to find just one bird at the nest site. Long hours were never spent in the nest.

On a cloudy 28 June 01 after 9 a.m. about a month later, three tiny black hatchlings, polka-dotted with large blobs of white on their backs fell out of the roof and landed safely on the lawn below. A few minutes later five more came down. Our first concern was their safety. So we picked the lot up and put them in a bucket of water for the time being. The mother was on the lawn when we collected the second lot of five. She made a great display of agitation and fury as she half spread her wings continuously shaking them, half-opened her mouth and kept shifting her ground quivering all the time. She was too frightened to approach us as we went to pick up her brood. In fact she went off a distance stretched out a wing and pretended to be injured and lame as lapwings are known to do to lure prowlers away from her nest. The eight hatchlings were put in a makeshift circular cement pond about 3 feet across. Eight inches of water and an island of stacked bricks to perch on made up the nursery. Once they had been settled in the mother came up to the pond wall constantly calling out to the brood and getting a chorus of chirps in response. It never occurred to her to climb in or perch on the nursery wall to get a look. She either sat nearby or circled the pond wall calling. Later she flew off. Her mate had also descended once or twice on the lawn and circled the pond with her but didn't stay too long. There seem to be no special features to distinguish male and female but later I thought I noticed that one of them had a more pronounced "cap" on the head. But only just. The hatchlings became quite noisy whenever they realised the parents were about. Otherwise they quietly frolicked in the water or snoozed on the perch and looked quite content.

## Encounter with Whistling Teals

B. NARAYAN DEB, Rajbari, P.O. Abhayapuri, Assam 783384

By early afternoon one hatchling had managed to jump the nursery wall. It was seen roaming the garden with both parents. Since we were very worried about feed we let the lot out. The mother called out and drew the lot to her. Then they trooped off to another part of the garden strung out in a line making such a pretty sight of eight black polka-dotted ducklings bobbing along chirpily.

By mid-afternoon the mother and brood were seen huddled together and a mongoose in hot pursuit. I was in time to shoo off the beast but noticed that there were now five hatchlings only. When evening drew near we collected the lot and put them back in the nursery for the night and covered the top. Two more hatchlings fell out of the roof in the evening raising the number to 7.

**Day 2, 29 June 01.** Early morning, when the parents were seen in the premises, we let the lot out. Meanwhile we had enclosed about 4000 square feet of the garden with old roof sheets to make it mongoose proof and even put in two large basins for pools. The duck family moved about when no one was around or chose to take cover in a corner near the small rock-garden by the wall where it was shadier and better covered. By evening, since the mother was with them in their favoured spot by the rock-garden we left them there for the night.

**Day 3, 30 June 01.** When we checked early in the morning around 5 a.m. the hatchlings were huddled and hidden deep under the thick foliage and no parents. The count revealed two missing. We found one body but there seemed to be no trace of the other one. No injury marks were found on the body. Our anxiety about food re-doubled. Were these starvation deaths? Where were the parents? Had they abandoned the brood? It was only later in the afternoon that relief arrived. I saw both parents facing the brood and lowering their long necks to ground level and regurgitating on the open grassless path. It was a relief. The brood were seen busy feeding from the ground. There wasn't much to eat because in no time they were back to trailing their parents. No feeding was noticed earlier. Through most of the day the family were seen tramping along the edge of the enclosure looking for a way out. This was specially so when the male arrived. According to village lore after the hatchlings are ready the male flies up above the family to direct them to the river or lake and also to warn them of danger on the ground. It was easy to believe this because this is what this male seemed to be doing all the time. The male seemed single-minded in its job of leading the family to some water body and was once successful in persuading the mother to the other side of the enclosure. But the end result was that the male was a little way ahead and away urging the mother to follow, the mother was by the enclosure wall but on the wrong side and the hatchlings were behind the enclosure trying their best to get to the mother who was calling out "seasick, seasick" (Salim Ali) to them. When I arrived, the mother gave a special soft

call that in a flash silenced the chirping and got the group to sit still and huddle under a bush. The huddle could be mistaken for a large black spotted creature from a distance - a defence strategy. This was repeated later. If the hatchlings had managed to get out they would surely have fallen prey to some predator. This portion of the enclosure did not have roof-sheets but chicken mesh above a low passage plinth. Once earlier I caught the mother, when it was inside the enclosure, jumping up and trying to crawl up the netting to get across. This was a climbing demonstration to the brood I thought, because if she wanted to, the mother had only to fly over. I was quite amazed. By evening the stalemate ultimately broke when the mother finally flew off and the hatchlings settled in a corner, huddled up, and soon fast asleep. They must have been very tired with all the trekking through the day. With no parents in attendance and night falling fast we put the lot back in the nursery.

Day 4. 1 July 01. Early morning, after the hatchlings were put out, we saw them with both parents busy feeding amongst the taller grasses. The parents just looked on but were on alert. Self-feeding had started. It was a great relief. The parents would take them along and stop by when the lot would fall amongst the grasses picking off what could be insects. It was like they were being taken out to "graze". It was also the first day that they used the two pools. The parents or parent would stop by and they would jump in and enjoy the pool. The previous day no use was made of the pools. In between, when visiting, the male would fly up, perch on the high compound wall and urge the mother to come up too. Poor mother looked quite confused and walked up and down along the wall below in vain with hatchlings following. One hatchling succumbed to the exhaustion that afternoon. It was the weak-born one or the one trampled upon by the mother earlier, who had suffered some injury. Was the trampling a deliberate culling act? There were four hatchlings now. They could feed by picking off from the grasses and were also observed running their little maroon-tipped beaks along the bottom of a shallow drain as ducks are wont to do.

On the same day in mid-afternoon, there was a sensational behavioural change. The ducklings were no longer following their parents around. They seemed to have their own agenda and would get amongst the grasses to feed or take to the pools while the parents or parent had to do the following! This cheered me enormously and my hopes soared that the final lot of four would survive, grow, and leave of their own in due time.

Day 5. 1 July 01. The ducklings had spent another night with the mother and again in the morning there was no parent. Four were counted. They were astir rather late, over an hour after daybreak. While no one was about the premises for about half an hour disaster struck. All four were found murdered, heads crushed and bleeding, scattered about the garden corner. Death seemed quick and unmessy. Later the murderer showed himself when unsuspectingly it came out of the bushes to collect its kill. It was a young adult mongoose: small enough to squeeze past a small gap between roof-sheet and a post and large enough to do the damage. We never

saw the parents again. Did they visit at all? Did they already know?

17 July 01. Meanwhile another pair has taken occupancy of the rooftop. In the old nest? It is difficult to say though it seems to be so. The soft plk-plk-plk call that emanates when it is sitting, more rapidly after a while as if in a crescendo, may be accompanying the laying. For the last four or five days no such call has been heard when the birds sit. Incubation period begun? The pair were first sighted on the rooftop on 9 July.

## Second Brood

I had to wait for developments here before getting back to you. This second pair of lesser whistling teal took unduly long to hatch their clutch of eggs. Going by our observations from a distance we estimated the arrival of the hatchlings around mid-August which means a month's incubation. The new clutch hatched on 23rd August instead. Our estimate may have been off by a week. Or was some adjustment made by the rooftop guests because of the long, dry, non-monsoon weather considering the family need flowing water to make it to a large water body? It so happens the Monsoon in the NE became active again from the 18 August and the lawns were flooded and flowing water became available. You perhaps know that the NE has had a phenomenally poor monsoon this year - and July was exceptionally hot, I assure you.

Ten hatchlings came down the roof around 12:30 p.m. on 23 August. The parents were in attendance. Better prepared this time, we quickly got the nursery tank cleaned and ready and transferred all the hatchlings till the gardeners had secured the place. Then the hatchlings were released and the family came together. One of the babies had fallen badly from the roof and had injured its leg. It had a distinct limp and soon keeping up with the rest became impossible for it. It started to stray off and wander about. A tiny dose of a no stoned Arnica 30x globule inserted in its mouth worked wonders as its limp began to disappear after about 15 minutes, and an hour or so later it could keep up with the group. By the end of the day one could not tell which had been the lame duckling! A few of the other birds in the compound seemed to take a little interest in the lonely and lost hatchling. One female magpie-robin came quite close by, intrigued by the baby chirp, and perhaps by the black and white colours of its own tribe. A pair of spotted doves also came close by the chirping baby but passed on. During all this time the parents seemed not to care about keeping the entire brood together. "Keep up or keep out" seemed to be their attitude. Or is it just that they could not count?

There were many surprises for us observers this time. We noticed that this pair looked slightly smaller. First time parents? Also the mother took better care because unlike the last one, she arrived at the crack of dawn and spent the entire day with the babies, never flying off till they were three days old, and that too for a short while. (The first mother didn't show up till an hour or so after day break and the brood was sometimes left unattended in the daytime.) We discovered the male was in attendance once, when the mother was away, from its



behaviour. As observed in the first instance the male showed the same single-minded zeal to lead the family away to a water body. This one's non-stop urgings had persuaded some of the hatchlings to slip through under the roof sheets. Four had managed that but the others had given up. When we went to collect the escapees to return them to the safety of the enclosure, this parent did not display the typical faint of being wounded, of keeping low, quivering, opening its mouth and looking terribly anxious and agitated as the female. Instead this one kept its distance, looked on briefly and flew off!

This pair was also much shyer and could keep to the corner of the garden if we sat out in the verandah or went about our business. We were compelled to stay indoors for most of the time. This encouraged the family to emerge and walk about, except they used only about half the enclosed space unlike the last family. However the mother was smarter and discovered that to get to her brood when they were inside the nursery tank meant perching on the rim. It did that and even entered the tank. We watched from the verandah. But it flew off because being inside the tank blocked her view, and our voices and presence disturbed her.

The hatchlings too were different at least in one way. Self-feeding had started on Day 3 rather than Day 4 as in the first instance. This time I could observe the self-feeding event very closely. The lot had come below my dressing room window. With my binoculars I could make out that it wasn't insects

they were picking off the grasses but that they were nibbling off the edges of the grasses and the leaves of some small plants.

On Day 4 in the afternoon, the hatchlings got to use the "swimming pool". Around 3:30 p.m. when I looked out of the bathroom window to locate the family I discovered an adult mongoose on the lawns and the mother out in the open looking alarmed. It was too late. We found the bodies scattered about the place, under the bushes here and there, four with heads smashed, one with no head and, strangely, two with no visible injuries. One hatchling was found in a state of near-collapse floating in the larger "swimming pool". I tried to revive it with Arnica but it lived another hour or so and died in my lap. It had no injury marks. The parents flew overhead once or twice and came again the next morning on the roof for the last time.

The nesting season is well nigh over. Flocks of lesser whistling teal have been seen in the skies. An occasional pair is still visible. Thank heaven the season is over. We'll take up the challenge next year.

Tuesday, 3 September 01. At 5:30 a.m. a pair of lesser whistling teal seen on the roof and the familiar soft pik-pik-pik sound that seems to accompany laying is heard all over again!

Urgent Information required: Can mongoose climb trees? How high can a mongoose jump to clear a barrier? How deep can it dig to get through a barrier?



I woke to the call of the brown fish owl around 0530 hrs. It was a single deep-noted 'boom' and sounded very close. I slowly opened the door and tiptoed in the semi-darkness in the chilliness of the late November morning. For sometime I could not see anything and waited for the bird to call again to locate it. The bird was silent. I scanned the possible perches where the bird might be located and there it was, just 50 m. away on the tiled roof of my neighbour's house. I could make out the faint outline of the bird against the sky. Soon it was on its wing, silently gliding away to another rooftop, not too far away. I was thrilled at the welcome I received as I got back after a five-week long absence from the valley.

Winter is perhaps the best time to watch birds in Rishi Valley, as the weather is very pleasant and there are plenty of migrants apart from the usual resident species around. This winter proved exceptionally good. Most of the migrants had started arriving at Rishi Valley from mid-September. By mid-October when I left the valley, I had recorded most of them. The grey wagtail was among the first to arrive on September 6<sup>th</sup> followed by the greenish leaf warbler and forest wagtail on 16<sup>th</sup>. The latter appears to be a passage migrant seen here both in autumn and spring. A pitla was heard on the afternoon of 23<sup>rd</sup> and the following day, I noticed a couple of lesser

whitethroats. Next to arrive were the haircrested and grey drongos, seen on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> October respectively. Though I had seen a female paradise flycatcher as early as 6<sup>th</sup> August, it was only on 9<sup>th</sup> October that the first male was seen. The next few days produced more migrants – blue rock thrush (10<sup>th</sup>), redbreasted flycatcher (13<sup>th</sup>), bluetheated flycatcher (14<sup>th</sup>) and kostrel and harrier sp. (15<sup>th</sup>). After this I myself had moved away to return in the last week of November.

The bluebearded bee-eater was the star attraction in the valley this winter. A single bird was noticed on several occasions in the month of December-January. The first was on the afternoon of 9<sup>th</sup> December at the Big Banyan tree. The last time I noticed it was on the 4<sup>th</sup> January. Apart from it being a "new" bird in the region, the nearest known locality being atleast 200 km to the south in the Shevaroy hills, northern Tamil Nadu, it was the 201<sup>st</sup> bird species in the Rishi Valley checklist. We got some lovely views of the bird and also got to hear its calls.

Two other uncommon birds turned up in good numbers this winter. The Indian tree pipit was seen in flocks of up to eight birds. Though recorded earlier in the campus, it was for the first time I was seeing them here. They were a little shy and it was only after several attempts I could identify them. The calls were thin, pleasant 'psik'. Olive brown upperparts, double wing

## A Winter in Rishi Valley

V. SANTHARAM, Rishi Valley Education Centre, Rishi Valley P.O 517352

bar, bold streaks on throat and breast, prominent supercilium and the black patch behind the eye were the field marks used in identifying the species.

The other uncommon bird that turned up in real good numbers was the common rosefinch. Seen first on the 10<sup>th</sup> December in the fodder farm on the sorghum plants (locally called 'jhonna') there were atleast 50 birds feeding on the ripening seeds. But it was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January that we really had a surprise. I had taken Eric and Chris Lott out on a bird walk towards the percolation tank that was bone dry since there was a failure of the monsoon in our area for two consecutive seasons. Adjacent to the dry tank bed was the sugarcane field with dense matured crop. It was nearing dusk when we noticed vast numbers of rosefinches and a few munies that kept moving around in the sugarcane fields. They appeared restless and were in constant motion. On hearing a tractor engine noise the whole flock took off, twisting and wheeling about in the air against the backdrop of a brilliant sunset before gradually descending back into the fields and settling in the sugarcane plants. It was only then we were able to make a rough count of their numbers – some 2000-2500 birds in all! The birds were seen the next day by some of the other birdwatchers in the campus and after that the birds were no longer seen in such large numbers as the sugarcane was harvested.

Yet another rarity for the campus was the blueheaded rock thrush, a brilliant male specimen that turned up next to Mr. Rangaswami's house. It was seen perched on branches at medium heights and would briefly descend to the ground to pick up some insect prey and then fly back. The white patch on its wing was conspicuous even in the shade of the canopy. The bird was seen on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> January. Perhaps it was around for a longer period but since I had made several trips out of the campus over the next two months I could not see it again. I had earlier seen this bird at the Horsley hills in February 2000 and at the Tirumala hills in December 1997. There are

very few earlier records of this species in Andhra Pradesh including one from the Horsley hills a few years ago.

On 14<sup>th</sup> January, there was a shaheen falcon on the Big Banyan tree. It was just after sunrise and the early morning sunrays were lighting up the bird. The falcon was using the tree as a lookout perch and making short forays in search of prey. The under parts were less red and presumably it was a juvenile bird. Though recorded earlier in the valley, this was the best and the closest view I ever had of the bird so far. A booted hawk-eagle in light colour phase was the next interesting bird in the valley. This bird is certainly not common in these parts unlike in Madras where it is a regular winter visitor at the Guindy Park and other wooded areas.

This winter brought us several paradise flycatchers, especially the lovely male specimens with their long streamers. Even non-birdwatchers and casual visitors to the valley saw them. Their presence generated more interest in birds amongst the residents of Rishi Valley. I had a lovely male coming to the tamarind tree in front of my house and flaunt its plumage to all those who passed by. I later found that the bird came to hawk insects (mosquitoes) emerging from the septic tank outlet next to the tree. It would perform aerobatics in catching them and the tail feathers would sway and swing gracefully in the air. Later it would quietly perch on a branch with the plumage contrasting against the dark tree trunk. So regular was it that my two sons (aged five and three) got used to its routine and would alert me about its arrival. One morning I was surprised to see a female flycatcher hovering above my door to pick up an insect! It then perched on the tamarind branch just a metre or so away. I called the kids to have a good look at it. They commented on its colouration and lack of the long tail feathers and wanted my assurance that it was not a bulbul. It was only when I produced the Book of Indian Birds were they satisfied that it was the female of the long-tailed bird they had been seeing. □



## Freshwater Lakes in Goa Buckling Under the Pressure of Salvinia Weed Menace

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Lakes have since time immemorial been considered a treasure trove of all forms of life. Their crystal clear waters, coming alive with the arrival of exuberant waterfowl and the magnificent pink and white lilies dancing to the tune of the swaying breeze, are indeed a sight to behold. The lily trotters/ jacanas draw awe as they flit around gracefully, on the wide-open leaves of the lotus/lilies. The strikingly beautiful ducks in hues of green, white, blue and brown, dabbling amidst the vast expanse of bubbling life promise to remain etched in memory for a long time to come.

Goa, a picturesque state along the west coast of India, boasts of numerous such freshwater lakes which provide refuge to myriads of resident and migrant waterfowl. These lakes also

earn substantial revenue for their respective village commune, through the sale of fish naturally grown in them. An ardent effort is also underway to promote ecotourism in these lakes. One such uniquely marvellous lake is the Carambolim lake (73° 55'N, 15° 30'E), in the Tiswadi taluka of north Goa, at a distance of 12kms from Panjim, the capital city of the state. The lake has a total area of 70ha, of which the central 40ha, are waterladen with a maximum depth of 2.75m at the sluice gate point at its southern end. A recently constructed Konkani Railway station overlooks the lake from the western side. Annually, the Carambolim lake is patronised by thousands of ducks, which include long distant migrants like pintails, shovellers and garganeys as well as local migrants, like lesser whistling teals and cotton teals. The lake is also visited by a



large number of coots. The Asian Midwinter Waterfowl Census (AWC) and personal observations by the authors, stake the average numbers of pintail ducks visiting the lake annually at around 6000. Besides, the lake is also occasionally visited by flocks of larger birds like white ibis, glossy ibis and whitenecked stork. Resident waterfowl like purple moorhen, Indian moorhen, bronzewing jacana, pheasant tail jacana and little egret can also be sighted with ease in the lake environs (Walia and Shanbhag 1999).

The vegetation of Carambolim lake comprises of an intricately woven fabric of *Hydrilla verticillata* and *Oryza rufipogon*, intermittently embroidered with white lilies of *Nymphaea indica* and *Nymphaoides cristata*. This vegetative ensemble provides ideal ecological niches as well as the requisite food material to many of the waterbirds. Further, the planktons entangled amongst the vegetation are also made readily available to the plantivorous waterbirds. Our study thus far showed that, till January 2000, none of the plants were in a proportion large enough to upset the natural equilibrium of the lake, while weeds like *Eichornia* and *Salvinia* were totally absent. Although other major water bodies in the country including the Harike lake in Punjab (Ladhar, *et. al.*) and the Nandhumadhumeswar reservoir in Nashik were completely engulfed by *Eichornia*/water hyacinth, such a phenomenon was unheard of in the state. It was only in March 2000 that small patches of *Salvinia*, an exotic weed were observed in the Mercedes Lake, about 2kms. from Panjim. Nevertheless, this lake, not being a favourite haunt of migrating waterbirds, with a maximum of only 300 cotton teals and 100 garganeys observed there in March 2000, went unnoticed. Sadly, at present the lake has been converted into a single green blanket of *Salvinia*, absolutely devoid of waterbirds except for the stray pond heron. The protein rich effluent entering the lake from the neighbouring abattoir, probably helps the population of the weed by leaps and bounds thereby pushing the ecology of the lake to an irredeemable point.

The Carambolim lake too, has not been spared of the dreadful *Salvinia* weed onslaught. In May 2000, the lake vegetation appeared perfectly tranquil with wild paddy, *Oryza rufipogon* continuing to be the most dominant vegetation. Only a very careful observation revealed a small patch of *Salvinia* towards the centre of the lake. However, in the same year, during September about 20% of the lake's surface was covered by a luxuriant mat of *Salvinia*. This coincided with the onset of bird migration to the lake. By November 2000, *Salvinia* had extended its arms to embrace about 60% of the lake's surface, thereby forcing the hapless birds to be content with only about 40% of the lake area which was available as open water. Presently, the lake has been reduced to a single extensive carpet of monotonous green with barely a few open spaces left to sustain plants like *hydrilla*, which are vital for the survival of the waterfowl in the lake. The sparkling white *Nymphaea* and *Nymphaoides*, once abundant in the lake have now been restricted to meagre pockets in the farthest niches of the waterbody. This has adversely affected the bird population of the lake, especially that of the residents. Lately, to the utter dismay of birdlovers, the weed has entered the Santa Monica

lake - a lake within the premises of Syngenta India Ltd., in the close vicinity of the Carambolim lake, which has for long been a haven for larger birds.

Although the genesis of the weed menace in the state is unclear, the fact remains that within the state, the birds themselves may have carried the weed or part thereof, from an infected waterbody to an uninfected one unmaliciously. As far as the Carambolim lake goes, the weed might have entered the lake from the study ponds of the neighbouring agricultural research station, where research is known to be carried out on the weed. The high organic matter present in the lake, night soil generated by the floating population and the nutrient rich surface runoff, collectively must have provided the nourishment required for the prolific growth and propagation of the weed therein. The monsoon wash down of the discarded food items and their empty packaging dumped along the western periphery of the lake could be yet another factor facilitating the luxuriant growth of the weed in the lake.

Thus, as the weed continues to infiltrate the bird-rich virgin freshwater bodies of the state, the baffling question remains, "Is *Salvinia* here to stay?" The answer is assertive 'yes'. Such a day is not very far, when all the lakes of the state will be converted into a single mass of *Salvinia*, if we do not act speedily enough to eradicate the weed faster than its propagation. The environment-conscious youth of the state have already initiated a mammoth drive to manually rid the Carambolim lake of its incubus. However, the toil of more than a month has brought little respite to the lake. Considering the mammoth task ahead and with a lack of government support and advanced gadgetry, their dream seems but a star in the distant horizon.

Only a multipronged approach can help combat the '*Salvinia* crisis'. On one hand the present efforts of volunteers and NGOs need be augmented through the funding, manpower and the modern heavy duty machinery. Secondly, a constant vigil on the other hitherto noninfected waterbodies is needed, especially during migratory season, to sight any early signs of the weed, so that it can be nipped in the bud. Thirdly, meticulously planned scientific efforts need be channelised to see the possibilities of utilisation of the enormous biomass, thus generated effortlessly through the uncontrolled propagation of the weed.

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This is in response to the question of artificially supporting bird species by human action (NLBW Vol. 41 No. 4, Page 43) I am not sure whether I would agree to placing chicks of an apparently incapable species into nests of more successful ones. The pointing question is why are *Prinia subflava* less successful (than) *Cisticola juncidis*? I would like to ask where this experiment was carried out. Surely the results from one nest each of the two species can hardly be accepted as conclusive. Actually the *Prinia* in question and the *cisticola* though nesting in the "Same Area" would be using different situations for nesting. Might it not be that the optimum ecological conditions for *Prinia subflava* were missing thereby the nests were more exposed? My impression is that the *Prinia* under question is a bird of tall grasses, sugarcane and millets as well as reeds, while *cisticola* inhabits shorter grass. The former habitat is under greater pressure and largely obliterated, so the possible reason being that the *Prinia* were nesting in substandard vegetation with nests more exposed and food supplies less than needed. Be what may, why should extra pressures be brought on to the *cisticola*? All bird species are facing

severe stress and certainly interference of this sort is not advisable.

(The rest of the article which deals with assistance to birds in general will be included in a later issue. -Ed.)

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The information in the Editorial is that *Prinia subflava* was being excessively predated upon. In that case controlling the predator is the choice. Why should one do it at all? At one stage the predator may have to be taken care of by man. Endangered species are often being taken care of by man. Special care is taken to hatch the eggs, rear the young, and when grown release them into the environment. But what happens to them in the natural environment is what matters. They may or may not cope with the conditions prevailing there. The desire to know the factors responsible for the declination/increase of a population of any organism in the natural environment is welcome. But man trying to substitute himself in the position of natural forces is to say the least ludicrous.

Prof. H. Daniel Wesley

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## Cross-fostering Experiments with Birds

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This has reference to the Editorial "Experiment with Warblers" (Issue 1, Vol. 11, July -Aug 2001). The editor has asked the birdwatchers to send their views about an interesting experiment wherein the nestlings of Indian wren warblers were transferred to the fantail warbler's nest.

I had the rare honour of interacting with Dr. Marian Stamp Dawkins of Oxford, UK, who was in Bangalore for two weeks in August 1999, attending the 26th International Ethological Conference, in her capacity as the Secretary-General of the International Council of Ethologists. She had requested us to accompany her on a week-long trip to Bandipur and Nagarhole forests and shorter birdwatching trips around Bangalore. During these outings she delved at length into the rapid advancements in the field of animal behaviour. As a student of Nobel Laureate Niko Tinbergen, Dawkins herself has contributed immensely in the field of animal behaviour for decades.

I feel it relevant to write about the cross-fostering experiments that have been carried out from time to time in birds and mammals to unravel the mysteries of sexual imprinting.

In 1976, Immelmann carried out a range of experiments to probe the effects of cross fostering between two species of estrildinae finches. He found that estrildines were particularly useful because they are not only easy to breed in small cages but also have a rapid life-cycle. The chicks

become independent at about five weeks from hatching and will be ready to breed by themselves soon after. Immelmann chose to cross-foster the chicks of Zebra finch by allowing the parents of Bengalese finch to rear the entire brood of zebra finch.

Firstly, he placed a single zebra finch egg in a clutch of the Bengalese finch and allowed the Bengalese finch parents to incubate the clutch and rear the whole brood. Later Immelmann isolated cross fostered zebra finch males until they were sexually mature. Once the male zebra finch was sexually mature, he gave it a choice to select between a female zebra finch and a female Bengalese finch. He had fabricated a cage with three parts separated by two transparent partitions. A continuous perch ran through the three partitions. The male zebra finch was placed in the middle portion, the female zebra finch was placed in the right portion and the female Bengalese finch was placed in the remaining left portion. The results were unequivocal; male zebra finch directed its courtships towards the female Bengalese finch and completely ignored the female of its own tribe. The preference was all the more noticeable because the female zebra finch responded at once with all the usual conspecific greeting calls and perched as close to the male zebra finch as the transparent partition allowed. The female Bengalese finch not only remained neutral to the courtship gestures of the male zebra finch but also exhibited avoidance as and when the male approached her. These



dramatic findings were parallel to some of Konard Lorenz's original observations. But scientists were not certain as to whether such sexual imprinting due to cross-fostering is irreversible or only a temporary phenomenon.

Once again Immelmann *et al.*, conducted experiments during 1990-91 to clear these doubts. As noticed from the experiments of 1976, sexually imprinted male zebra finches initially prefer to court females of their Bengalese foster parent species. In the subsequent experiments in 1990-91 Immelmann *et al.*, confined the cross-fostered male zebra finches with the females of its own species. But the males exhibited their reluctance to court the females of their own kind for quite some time. In the absence of any choice, the male zebra finches eventually gave in and mated with their conspecific partners. Thus the male was allowed to raise a couple of broods together. Then Immelmann took the male back to its original three parts cage and the results were again dramatic! In almost all the cases, the male zebra finch preferred to court the female Bengalese finch as vigorously as he did in the very first instant. This experiment has shown that sexual imprinting is quite resistant to changes. But some other experiments have shown that such easy conclusions are not as simple as one believed. It appears that the experience of taking part in courtship with females of foster parent species, serves some how to "engrave" or consolidate the effects of sexual imprinting which is initiated during the forced period of dependence as a nestling, on foster-parents.

Lorenz had shown that sexual imprinting of similar type certainly occurs in pigeons, geese and ducks. But one should remember that such imprints fail to happen in cuckoos, which are also unwillingly reared by foster parents in nature. During the course of evolution nest parasites have inherently developed alternate mechanisms for sexual preferences. Thereby the male cuckoos when they attain adulthood, are able to recognise and court females of their own species and seldom make amorous advances towards the females of the species that fostered them!

A word of caution to all those interested in conducting such experiments. Most of the birds occurring in India are protected under Part III of Schedule I and Schedule IV of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and permission is mandatory under Section 12 (b) of the Act for conducting research on any wild animal or bird specified in these schedules.

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## REVIEWS

(Reviews by the Editor)

### THE BIRDS OF ASSAM, ANWARUDDIN CHOWDHURY

Gibbon books/ World Wide Fund for Nature - India, North East Regional Office, 240 pp, Rs. 295/-

Rather than attempt a critical review of this magnificent book, I shall simply try to describe its contents; and my description will be made up mainly of quotations from the book itself. I start by quoting from the blurb on the back cover: "It is an up-to-date guide-cum-reference with current status reports of the avifauna of the area (Assam). The most comprehensive publication on the birds of that region. Most of the globally threatened, new threatened, regionally threatened and rarer species, including new species and other significant records. The book is, in short, a complete, detailed and accurate account of all birds of Assam, which means to a great extent, all the birds of the sub-continent. The emphasis is not merely on identification, but the ecology, conservation and habitat protection. All relevant information, including laws and their effectiveness or otherwise, is up-to-the minute."

The early general chapters, which deal with the History of Ornithology, and Bird Migration, are brisk and crowded with facts. After that the different habitats are each given a section - Forest, Grassland, Rivers and Streams, Marshes, Hills, Towns and Countryside and Birds and Man. Descriptions of

habitats are not merely general; each area is given a local habitation and a name - its size, location, climate, flora and fauna, general character, its health in conservation terms.

Let us take one example, say Grasslands, and see how the author deals with it. He starts by describing what he means by grassland - ranging from tall elephant grass to open country. Then follows a list of the major grassland areas which "some 60 species use as their primary habitat, including the Bengal Florican swamp partridge etc." Their life-style and behaviour are related to their habitat in interesting and insightful detail. Finally, a table shows the 23 main grasslands, their location (long-lat.), size, the different grass species, and their conservation status - from 1A (adequately protected) to D (No protection).

Each type of habitat gets this complete treatment. Every area or habitat is given coded numbers or symbols, showing its pluses and minuses, and this fixes its position on the conservation map. Dr. Anwaruddin Chowdhury is insistent that it is the habitat on which we must try to concentrate, rather than the species. If the habitat can be made to recover, the birds will multiply.

Descriptions of individual species is divided into two sections. The first, called "Species Accounts" deals with the more common and the more "threatened" species. Here each species, its distribution, ecology, its historical status, present population and future prospects are described at length

incorporating much new material. Of Byth's Baza for example, "The voice of the nominate subspecies - was recorded for the first time in Dhansiri Reserved Forest - It was a shrill whistle". His notes about the near-disappearance of the white-winged wood-ducks is an illustration of his very practical approach to conservation. Among the measures proposed for saving it, he suggests that "the tiny garampani WLS should be expanded to include Nambor RF, the Indian Oil Corporation (Assam Oil Division) at Dighoi should declare the forests within the oil field area as a Nature Reserve, check pollution of jungle pools by pesticides and oil, check commercial felling, including removal of old and dead trees."

A second section called *Species Notes* deals with commoner birds in a briefer but similar way. Finally the *checklist*. This is not simply a very long list of birds. It is the families which are listed with a telling description of its characteristics followed by the names of its members. As an example, about the Kingfisher family: "World 84 species : India 12 species; N.E. India, Assam, 11 species. Compact body, large head and massive long, pointed bill. Legs short with syndactyl feet. Wings short and rounded. Sexes generally alike. Flight direct and rapid. Some species, over. Usually solitary. Voice is a sharp call or discordant scream. Feed on fish, also frogs, insects, reptiles, etc. which are taken by swooping from a perch. Nest in burrows in riverbeds or holes in trees. Eggs 2-7 incubated by both sexes."

This recognizable word picture of all kingfishers is followed by a coded list of the 11 species found in Assam. The symbols tell the reader whether the bird is resident, breeding or passage migrant, whether common or occasional and above all, its conservation status.

Dr. Anwaruddin Chowdhury is a world-class artist. His birds are not just dummies in profile, however accurate. They are real things in action - cheeky, lively, busy, in their typical posture. These captivating drawings weave in and out of the text, making each page a treat for the eyes as well as food for the mind.

Colour plates show the main types of habitats: unfortunately, the colour reproduction does not match the production values of the rest of the book. The author tells us there is no Press in Assam which can print in 4 colours.

Dr. Chowdhury has a doctorate in Primatology. When not occupied with ornithology, botany, drawing, cartography, photography, writing, or saving the rhino he works for the Assam Civil Service!

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**WATER BIRDS OF NORTHERN INDIA, J.R.B. ALFRED, ARUN KUMAR, P.C. TAK, J.P. SATI.**

Colour illustrations by Manoj Rawat. Published by the Zoological Survey of India, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Govt. of India. (227 pages, 44 colour plates, Index of English & Scientific Names, Bibliography) Price: Rs. 200/- Paper back, Rs. 750/- Hardbound.

This is an extremely comprehensive and thorough book, likely to help all birdwatchers, but especially those interested in waterbirds. It is well produced and printed (except for a few misprints). The colour plates are excellent. Clearly some trouble has been taken over its production.

The first chapter describes the different kinds of wetlands - including the 6 major lakes which were designated important sites at the Ramsar Convention (Iran) in 1971. Any piece of land covered by water is a wetland - whether salt water or fresh water, artificial or natural, flowing or still, deep or shallow, with or without vegetation. This book describes the 180 species which inhabit one or another type of wetland as well as 36 other "wetland-dependent" birds. Every bird is carefully described, its habitat, habits, breeding pattern, and distribution with its status noted in the new-conventional symbols.

At this time, when there is a general concern about our disappearing wetlands, this book is very well timed and will, let us hope, give a new impetus not only to birding but to forms of activity which will preserve and protect water bodies. The authors of this book are anxious to get every kind of help from amateur birders. Many of our readers do take part annually, in the waterbird count. There are several data sheets for this at the end of the book, and birders are asked to fill them in. However, perhaps any unusual data about bird numbers would be welcome. The coordinator is: Dr. Arun Kumar, Northern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, 218 Kaulagarh Road P.O. IPE, Dehradun. Finally, at Rs. 200/- this book is excellent value for any birder.

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**A BIRDWATCHERS' GUIDE TO INDIA, KRYS KAZMIERCZAK & RAJ SINGH**

Oxford University Press. 337 pp. £18.75, Rs. 395 in India

A review of the first printing of this book was published in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers in the January 1993 issue. Printed in England, the price at £18.75 was beyond the reach of most Indian birders; the present reprint, produced in India, costs Rs. 395/- and is affordable. Although originally produced to help the foreign naturalist, most of the information is likely to be just as useful for us. Some of the information like addresses, telephone numbers, prices and so on, have changed since the book first appeared nearly 3 years ago. The authors have corrected this, as far as possible by adding some pages of *Addendum* at the end.

For those who either did not read, or have forgotten our first review of Jan'99, we would remind them that this is an exhaustive guide, which provides bird and wildlife watchers with all the information they may need and about India - the best birding areas, how to get there, what to look for, how to cope with taxis, hotels, food, health and clothing. For the foreign birdwatcher, this book could be almost as necessary as a pair of binoculars.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

**VULTURE SIGHTINGS IN THE SHIVALIK REGION OF PUNJAB.** Dr. M.A. KHALID, PIA SETHI, K.K. MOHAPATRA and D.D. BHUJANGA RAO, Forestry and Biodiversity Group, Tata Energy Research Institute, Habitat Place, Lodi Road, New Delhi 110003

A recent visit to Punjab by Tata Energy Research Institute researchers led to a number of vulture sightings, a positive development in view of the current trend of declining vulture populations. The most significant sighting was on 3 Dec 2000, when a flock of about 100 Eurasian griffon (*Gyps fulvus*) vultures was observed to be circling over two buffalo carcasses along a dry river bed. This flock may also have included some white-rumped vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) since they are reported from Punjab. The carcasses were separated by a distance of about 300 m from another buffalo carcass at which 50 Eurasian griffon vultures had congregated. None of these vultures appeared to exhibit signs of head drooping, reported to be a symptom of a disease that is hypothesized as one of the reasons behind recent vulture population declines. This sighting occurred just off the Pathankot-Dhar road located 1 km away from Chakki. The riverbed was edged with weeds such as *Ipomea* and *Lantana* species and dotted with some khair (*Acacia catechu*) and Bombay species. The sighting occurred at 12:05 and the vultures were watched for about half an hour.

Other sightings in December, 2000, include three air borne white-rumped vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) about 17 km from Dhar near Pathankot in N. Western Punjab, and 1 white-rumped vulture on a Shisham (*Delbergia sissoo*) tree at Naushera pattan (river crossing) near the Mukerian range of Dasuya forest division. Another white-rumped vulture was observed in flight at the Mukerian river area near Maulia in Dasuya forest division. A juvenile scavenger vulture was also observed in Narangpur Protected Forest of Ropar Forest division during our survey.

All these vulture sightings were in the Shivalik area of Punjab. According to some officials of the forest department with whom discussions were held, vulture populations in the Shivalik area of Punjab appear to be improving of late and there has been an increase in recent sightings.

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**PROJECT LIFESCAPE: CROW.** Lt General BALJIT SINGH (Retd.), House 219, Sector 16 A, Chandigarh 160 015

Dr. Madhav Gadgil's profile of crows (Resonance, Feb 2001) is the most comprehensive compilation and it makes compelling reading. There are patches in his text, which have the sensitivity and flow of poetry. Yet there are two statements in the text, which I find difficult to reconcile with the ground realities of today.

When talking of the distribution of crows Dr. Gadgil contends: "the Jackdaw is confined to Kashmir and North Punjab" (page 75) and the house crow covers "most of the Indian subcontinent with the exception of Kashmir and Northern Punjab" (page 76). It may be presumptuous of me to state that Dr. Gadgil's source-material on the distribution of the house crow and the jackdaw perhaps pertains to the time when most of what is North Eastern and Eastern Pakistan today was part of Punjab. Sadly for Punjab, the redrawing of its boundaries did not end in 1947 alone: first Himachal, then Haryana and later U.T., Chandigarh were also carved out of it. No wonder therefore that the distribution of these two species of crows mentioned by Dr. Gadgil in his text is incompatible with the administrative boundaries of the state of Punjab existing today. As of now the districts of Pathankot and Gurdaspur would constitute North Punjab and Amritsar the NW Punjab. The house crow is as much omnipresent in these three districts as it is in the rest of Punjab, the year round. As for the jackdaw, it is improbable that it occurs in North Punjab at all these days.

I had written to Dr. Gadgil in Feb 2001 but having had no response from him, I think it is necessary to share my views with a larger readership. Hopefully, Dr. Gadgil will suitably modify his text. I even find the statement on page 74 that the crows have "tails shorter than wing" most difficult to accept. Ever since I read this article, I can no longer go past any house crow without looking intently at its wing tips vis-a-vis its tail. Invariably the tail of the House crow is conclusively longer than its wings. Illustrations of the jackdaw and the jungle crow lead to a similar conclusion. Perhaps in the case of the raven the wing tips may just tip a wee bit beyond the tail.

Dr. Gadgil talks of crows "harrying and swearing at people". Perhaps the best characterisation of the crow in this regard is left to us by Lockwood Kipling (Rudyard's father) in his book "Animals in India: the suffering species" published in 1904:-

"I once reared from the nest a pair of hill crows, - ravens in all but size, - who lived with me for three years, till one after the other they were wooed away to mate. They were miracles of naughtiness, delighting in sly destruction and odd turns of malice, ever ready to peck at a servant's hurrying heel, and especially given to torment a little dog that hated them: 'When he had a bone they came daintily stepping together and concerted measures against him, exactly like the stage villains of melodrama, manoeuvring and skirmishing with keen enjoyment. On his part, the dog learned to watch and rifle their hiding-places. Their delight in bright objects was remarkable. The spoon in my early morning tea, taken in the garden or verandah, was of even more interest to them than my buttered toast, and they were never tired of tugging at my watch-chain in order to get out the watch, a deeply coveted plaything. Everything of this shining sort that came within reach was promptly buried, dug up again, reburied with elaborate precautions, and forgotten after a few days. In the hot weather they vastly enjoyed eating and playing with pieces of ice, which they hid for future use. But ice is a treasure fleeting as fairy gold, and the birds showed by the fussy action, sidelong squints and interrogative turns of the head which make them

such diverting comedians, how deeply they were puzzled by its disappearance. "Surely, surely" one would seem to say as he turned up a corner of the matting, "I hid a cold chunk of shining stuff here – but where is it? Never mind, I will get another". So he would hop up to the table and take a fresh piece from the glass fingerbowl, itself a great delight to the glitter-loving birds. To the last the disappearance of the ice was a wonder. But, like that of some other comedians, their conduct was generally low. The way in which they allowed themselves to be sent to bed (an old gate in an outhouse), though free to fly at will, pacing meekly as good as gold, after a day of variegated crime, was their only lapse into real virtue."

\* \* \*

**BANDING OF SARUS CRANE.** Lt General BALJIT SINGH (Retd.), House 219, Sector 16 A, Chandigarh 160 015

Though acceptable it is in the pursuit of scientific enquiry nevertheless the act of shooting and or trapping of birds and animals to meet the ends of science is at best an agonising necessity. I have no axe to grind with Rajeev Chauhan and the WII for the banding of sarus chicks in the wild (NLBW Vol. 41, No. 1, Jan., Feb., 2001, Page 11) but was it scientifically truly warranted? As a layman I have serious reservations. Will someone please let me know how the data so gathered in the instant case will strengthen our brief for the conservation of the wetlands, the habitat of the sarus? Don't we already have adequate database to build our case?

Unlike most bird species the sarus are known to remain confined within a limited geographical range. It is also known that sarus take to minimal local migration and only in times of drought. Being the largest of birds that keep to open spaces, it would be possible to monitor them, visually and optically sans banded legs for any length of time. George Schaller working in Kanha in the 50s had come to recognise each tiger through variations in stripes on the forehead of each animal. Laurie Baker did much the same with the Rhino in the Chitwan Park in Nepal. Then we have the example from Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and co., relying exclusively on basic human faculties in studying their animals in the wild against all odds for days, nights, months and years. Might not we do the same with our sarus? Once the bone in the wing or leg breaks in the struggle for "capture", we may technically set the bone but will the chick survive the recuperation?

If we want to initiate newcomers to the art of bird banding, let them join the annual bird banding camps of the BNHS where from years of experience the well-being of the bird is always given precedence over our scientific quest.

All this aside, where was the need for the rapturous description of the art of closing with a family of sarus, giving chase, separating the parents from their progeny, keeping up the chase, fling the infant bird to the point of total exhaustion and ultimately two human hands grasping and lifting ("capturing") the hapless chick?

I saw the terror in the eyes of the chick; eye balls dilated; the orange of the iris accentuated, pleading and popping from

the sockets. I heard the loud, palpable thudding of his little heart so loud that even the deaf would stand up. I felt the utter panic and despair of the parents forced to be spectators to this ultimate in emotional and physical trauma. Above all, the centuries-old bond of trust between Sarus and Man has been destroyed in one rash move.

No, Mr. Field Scientist, I do not object to your pursuit of science but in the act let us not intrude into the zone of inner sensitivities of birds, animals and fellow humans. Yes, I admit that there will always be banner photographs of soldiers atop the Tiger Hill exulting in victory but let us never allow transmission in any form, the brutal imagery of the thrusting of the bayonet into living flesh. We have to understand that difference and not transgress the invisible line.

All of us are aware of the dimensions of the prevailing trade in birds and the ingenuity of the trapper-poacher. To my knowledge, the Sarus was safe from this menace. But now since the locals (villagers) were enrolled to participate in the act of "capture" of the chicks we may have unwittingly accelerated the demise of the Sarus. Would Rajeev Chauhan and his colleagues please do everything that is possible to wipe out the "fingerprints" of the act of capturing the sarus chicks lest they are patented by the villager, turned trapper, turned poacher and untimely another source on the bird traders' inventory. It is not my intention to start a controversy and a slanging debate (a Lok Sabha) but I appeal for an immediate damage-control strategy and action on ground. I know for a fact that sarus make cherished pets; lovable, mercifully not so loving but dignified and a commanding presence in a large compound of any home. But they pine for the wilderness all the while and seldom survive long.

\* \* \*

**DANGERS OF KITE FLYING AND KITES.** ANISH P. ANDHERIA, Sagar Building, V.P. Road, Andheri West, Mumbai 400058

Every year, during the kite-flying season, countless razor-sharp strings are strewn over trees, streetlamps, television antennae, overhead electric/telephone lines, etc. Oblivious of the apparent danger, many birds frequent these perches, only to get tangled in these man-made nooses.

While the diurnal birds, due to the availability of natural light, have a better chance of evading these traps, their nocturnal counterpart viz., bats and owls are highly prone to entanglement, often resulting in a broken wing or foot.

Each year, around the same time, there is a significant rise in the frequency of phone calls from various parts of Mumbai city for rescue/rehabilitation of badly injured bats and owls.

One such owl was brought to me with a broken left shoulder along with necrosis due to a deep wound that was inflicted during the frantic attempts of the bird to free itself from the string. Eventually, 12 painful days and many medical consultations later, euthanasia was practiced in order to end its agony.



Even today, I have practised "euthanasia" on two ailing birds - a young pond heron (suffering from "Ranikhet") and a young crow pheasant (suffering from a congenital bone disorder) - I was working on them for over 10 painful days! Finally, yesterday, my vet informed me that they would never make it to the wild. I thus decide to relieve them of the pain. With every painful day, I feel that we urgently need better medical facilities for animals. Hope sometime in the future, I can start a well-equipped rehabilitation centre for wild animals.

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**SIGHTING OF RUFOUSTAILED FLYCATCHER *MUSCICAPA RUFICAUDA* IN AND AROUND HYDERABAD, ANDHRA PRADESH.** AASHEESH PITTIE and RAJEEV MATHEW, 8-2-545 "Prom Paravasi", Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034

While watching a feeding party in my (A.F.) garden in Hyderabad, on 24th October 1997 - comprising 4 verditer flycatcher *Eumylas infans*, 1 brownbreasted flycatcher *Muscicapa multui*, 1 redbreasted flycatcher *Ficedula parva*, 1 Tickell's blue flycatcher, *Cyanis tickelliae*, purple *Noctaninia asiatica* and purplerumped *N. zeylonica* sunbirds, 2 dull green leaf warblers *Phylloscopus trochiloides* and 1 Blyth's reed warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* - I spotted a bird of the 'brown flycatcher' variety, but sporting a rufous tail. It was feeding within the middle and upper canopy of dense foliage trees like mango and neem. Not once did I see it sally in pursuit of prey from the top of a tree, as is the wont of some of its tribe. I had pretty good sightings of this bird, as it was quite confident and I could get into almost eye-level position with it. The plumage was brown above, dirty white below, with a rufous rump and tail. The tail was notched. It had a prominent black eye with a thin white eye-ring. The legs were blackish. Once when it was disturbed by my presence (being just 10' away from me), it flicked open-and-shut its wings, above its body, uttering a muted "tchun tchun". It was a rufoustailed flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*.

This same bird was also seen (by R.M.) on 12 October 1997 and again on the 14<sup>th</sup>, in another part of the city, where it perched in some trees on a small overgrown patch of land, for a considerable time (1 hour).

On 18th October 1997, members of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh visited Anantgiri, Rangareddi District, Andhra Pradesh (approx. 80 km from Hyderabad), where they had a fleeting glimpse of a "brown flycatcher" type of bird, matching the description of the rufoustailed flycatcher. Though it could not be identified positively on the spot, its rufous tail was seen when it emerged momentarily from dense foliage onto an exposed perch. In retrospect, we think it was this same bird. Another *Muscicapa* sp. flycatcher with a rufous tail was seen by C. Tom Hash at ICRISAT Campus, Patancheru, Medak District, Andhra Pradesh (approx. 35 km from Hyderabad), on 12 October 1997.

These sightings are significant as there are only 2 previously documented records of this bird from Andhra Pradesh. Jerdon

(1882) 'obtained one specimen at Nellore in the Carnatic in March'. Price (1980) mentions of 'a single passage record of a bird trapped on the 4th April'.

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**CROW-PHEASANT NESTLING EATEN BY A RAT SNAKE.** S.SIVAKUMAR and S.SARAVANAN, Research Fellows, BNHS, Hornbill House, Mumbai-400023

On the evening of 24th August 2001, we went for wildlife photography to Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. We were busy taking photographs of a huge breeding heronry near the Ghana canal. Suddenly, Saravanan pointed to a crow-pheasant (*Centropus sinensis*) poised aggressively with its wings spread. The bird was about 50 m from us, on the road. We went closer and saw a huge Rat Snake *Ptyas mucosus* (c. 5-6') swallowing a nestling of the Crow Pheasant. The nestling was small, eyes open; a few feathers (juvenile) growing in its caudal and malar region. The other parent, standing near the bushes was also trying to save the nestling from the snake. When the birds approached close to the snake, it raised its tail to threaten them and they retreated.

I approached within 10 m of the snake and the snake moved away after leaving the prey. Chick was almost dead with blood oozing from its mouth and eyes, but respiration indicated that it was still alive. We kept enough distance from the scene to avoid disturbance to the predator. After a minute, the snake came out and dragged the prey in to the bush. It was an interesting sight and finally the snake put the parent's efforts to naught.

Crow-pheasants prefer bushes and thorny tree branches for nesting (Ali and Ripley 1987). But here the eggs and young ones were easily approachable by snakes. Natarajan (1997) has recorded crow-pheasants chasing jungle crow, house crow and brahmily kite and even the Common Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsi*) when they came near the nesting site. Our observation indicates that the Rat Snake is also a nest predator of this bird.

#### Acknowledgments

We thank BNHS for giving us chance to visit the area and Mr. N. Sivakumaran, Research Assistant, BNHS for his valuable suggestions.

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**INSPIRATION OF BIRDS: WORLD BIRDWATCH 2001.**  
ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N.S. Road, In front of T.O.P., Malda  
732101, West Bengal

To catch up with the world's mega birdwatching event I organised a "Birdwatching and Environmental Awareness Camp" on 7th October 2001 at Adina Reserve Forest of Malda district in West Bengal. This event was sponsored by the Rotary Club of Malda (R.I. Dist. - 3240) and Directorate of Field Publicity (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting), Government of India, Malda Unit. The forest department of Malda also cooperated during the program while celebrating Wildlife Week.

The event was very successful and I was satisfied by the presence of more than fifty persons from every walk of life which included children below ten years to retired persons above the age of sixty five, students, journalists, businessmen, school teachers, newspaper editors, government officials, doctors, local village children, even our bus driver, conductor and food caterer. All of them saw birds first time through a binocular. On the occasion a book on bird watching in Bengali was published by the Rotary Club of Malda, which was written by me. Probably it was the first bird watching guide book in Bengali. At the end of the event certificates were distributed among all the participants by the Directorate of Field Publicity (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting), Government of India undersigned by me. 84 bird species were sighted on this occasion.

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**HOUSE MARTIN RINGING.** L.A. HILL., 37, Tamworth Road,  
North Walsham, Norfolk NR 28, 94T

In No.3, May/June issue of Newsletter, I enjoyed Zai Whitakers Nightjar letter! Also birds in the Andamans extracts from B.B. Osinaeton.

My annual House Martin project is now virtually over, as most of the birds have gone. I have caught about 240 of which some 60 have been retraps, ringed (by me) in previous years. 43 last year. Seven in 1999 and 4 in 1998.

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## For 2002

*While wishing all our readers a very happy and successful New Year, let us resolve that being birds of the same feather, we will always flock together.*

-Editor

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

### HANDBOOK ON CITY TREES AND URBAN PLANTING (URBAN FORESTRY)

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**Cover:** Glossy starling (*Aplonis panayensis*) A diminutive, somewhat sleek black myna, with glossy green-black plumage. Lives in noisy gregarious social groups and frequents coconut groves, forest edges and cultivation clearings with scattered trees. Occurs in Andaman, Nicobar islands and N.Eastern India. Feeds on insects and berries and is particularly fond of figs of *Ficus benjamina* and flower nectar of *Salmalia* and *Erythrina*. Call is a single sharp metallic note.

Photo: S. Sridhar, ARPS